CHRISTIAN MISSION AS DIALOGUE

Engaging the Current epistemological predicament of the West

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Engaging the Current epistemological predicament of the West

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Christian Mission as Dialogue:
Engaging the Current epistemological predicament of the West

een wetenschappelijke proeve op het gebied van de Theologie

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INTRODUCTION

The field of enquiry

This study is located within the discipline of theology, and more particularly within that sector of the discipline known as missiology. Missiology has had, within a number of European universities, a distinguished history. Thus, for example, chairs of missiology (or mission studies) have been created since the middle of the nineteenth century in Germany, the Netherlands, the Nordic countries, the United Kingdom and the Vatican. Initially, academic interest in the subject was the result of the modern mission movement, from the end of the 18th century, which accompanied the colonial enterprise of a number of European nations, and was inspired in part by the particular spiritual awakenings of the 18th and 19th centuries in Europe and the United States of America.

In more recent times, missiological studies have incorporated a broader spectrum of specialist interests, such as the inculturation and contextualisation of the Christian message, dialogue with world religions and ideologies, a preferential option for the poor, justice for the marginalised and oppressed, reconciliation and peace, the integrity of creation. The expansion of the discipline is due in large part to the incorporation into the discourse of participants from the global South,[1] who have insisted that the burning issues of their context are taken seriously by all parts of the universal church.[2] Global communications and ease of travel have facilitated a more direct conversation between Christian scholars from diverse locations across the world. This is illustrated, in part, by the number of people doing post-graduate studies in subjects allied to missiology in European and North American universities, the quantity of nationals from Africa, Asia and Latin America teaching in Western academic institutions and the increase in the number of specialist institutions dedicated to the study of mission. Largely due to certain sensitivities surrounding the notion of mission in a pluralist world, chairs in missiology have in some cases been given other titles – World Christianity, Contextual Studies, Interreligious Studies and Ecumenical Studies.[3] Nevertheless, the study of mission, perhaps for different reasons in different places, is high on the agenda of churches in the North and the South, the East and the West.

Since the end of the 1960s, a world-wide academic body of teachers of mission has existed – the International Association of Mission Studies. This sponsors international assemblies every four years, publishes a peer-reviewed journal, *Mission Studies*, facilitates specialist study groups and encourages regional associations to undertake their own specific programmes. Other complementary organisations[4] also exist that,

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[1] It is also referred to as 'the majority world.'

[2] See, Timothy Tennent, 'The Emergence of a Global Theological Discourse' in *Theology in the Context of World Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007).

[3] See, Viggo Mortensen, 'Teaching Missiology in a Secular University' in Tormod Engelsviken, Ernst Harbakk, Rolv Olsen and Thor Strandenaes (eds), *Mission to the World: Communicating the Gospel in the 21st Century(Essays in Honour of Knud Jorgensen)* (Oxford: Regnum Books International, 2008), pp. 405-418.

[4] Such as The Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT), the Council for World Mission and Evangelism (CWME) of the World Council of Churches and the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelisation (LCWE).

broadly speaking, are interested in exploring the implications for the church's mission of the challenges of 21st century life around the globe – such as, globalisation, violence, the environment, poverty and development, interreligious dialogue, migration, refugees, indigenous churches, evangelisation and re-evangelisation, and reverse mission.

The recent convocation in Edinburgh (2-6 June, 2010) of an international gathering of mission practitioners and scholars to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the 1910 Edinburgh Conference illustrates the interest in and vibrancy of mission reflection and action from across the world church. Every major Christian tradition was well represented in terms of delegates, session leaders and speakers – the Orthodox churches, the Catholic Church, Protestant churches associated with the World Council of Churches, Evangelical Christians, allied to the World Evangelical Alliance and the Lausanne Movement, and Pentecostals. Perhaps, never before has there been such a representative gathering of Christians assembled together for consultation. What brought them to the conference was a mutual interest in the past, present and future of Christian mission. The study groups which preceded the conference and which produced substantial reports[5] tackled themes of vital concern for mission understanding in the 21st century, such as Other faiths, Post-modernities, Power, Christian Unity, Spirituality and the position of women in mission.

Missiology, then, is an intellectual discipline that aims to reflect critically on the theoretical foundations, context and the practise of the churches' life and work, in the light of the *missio Dei*.[6] It aspires to engage normatively with these aspects of mission by formulating adequate criteria for the discernment of good and bad mission thinking and action. Christian mission may be understood as the church's pursuits *ad extra*, in fulfilment of the calling it believes it has received from its divine head. In particular, mission implies the communication of the transforming good news of Jesus Christ through the church's life of service, proclamation and testimony. Mission happens at the frontiers between different beliefs and values, where the Christian message challenges and is challenged by alternative interpretations of reality.[7]

Missiology seeks to answer a number of basic questions about mission: how and why does the Christian faith cross frontiers? What drives it to be a missionary religion? Who is it that crosses the frontiers and what is their motivation? How does the study of mission relate to other theological disciplines? To achieve its aims, missiology interacts with other disciplines, most notably anthropology, sociology, cultural studies, historical studies and the political sciences. These help to anchor its reflection in the description and analysis of concrete situations. At the same time, it employs its

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[5] See, Daryl Balia and Kirsteen Kim (eds.), *Witnessing to Christ Today, Vol. II* (Oxford: Regnum Books International, 2010).

[6] The emphasis on God's mission as a prerequisite for the mission of God's people came to the fore in mission thinking in the early 1950s; see, David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1991), pp. 389-393. One Old Testament scholar has recently claimed that the *missio Dei* is the primary hermeneutical key for understanding the broad sweep of the Biblical narrative; see, Christopher Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's grand narrative* (Nottingham: IVP, 2006).

[7] See, J. Andrew Kirk, *What is Mission? Theological Explorations* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1999); Stephen B. Bevans and Roger P. Schroeder, *Constants in Context: A Theology of Mission for Today* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2005).

own methodologies that include biblical and theological foundations, historical interpretation, theories of contextualisation and translation, field studies, the study of religion and the ethics of mission.

It can be seen from this discussion that missiology is a discreet discipline, closely allied to other disciplines, but with its own agenda and fields of research. My subject of study, which promotes an interaction between missiology and disciplines in the fields of philosophy (such as epistemology and moral reasoning), the philosophy of religion and theology, may appear unusual, because there is not much of a tradition of this kind of exchange to build on. However, due to the inter-disciplinary nature of missiology, it is legitimate to extend the dialogue into these relatively unexplored areas.

Epistemology as a dialogue partner

Epistemology is a discipline of studies that examines the convictions that people have about how and what it is possible to know. Inevitably, for life to proceed normally, everyone has to make claims about their ability to know with reasonable certainty that certain matters are as we describe them. Thus, for example, if a motorist is unfamiliar with the town in which I live and asks me for directions to a certain street, I can direct her, as long as I *know* exactly where the street is located and which is the best route to find it. Furthermore, if the motorist happens to be trying to find the street when there is heavy traffic around, and assuming I *know* a better alternative way, I can advise her to take the one uncongested by traffic.

Normally, the motorist would accept my help with gratitude, assuming that I had every right to be confident about my knowledge of that particular place. However, she might have had some suspicions that I was playing a trick on her, pretending to possess a knowledge of the locality that I did not have, because I was too proud to admit my ignorance. In which case, she might want to know how I am able to justify my belief that the directions given will result in her reaching her destination. The answer to this question could be that I just happen to have lived in that street for the last ten years and that, as a regular commuter to another town for work, I know how to avoid all the major traffic blocks. The motorist should then be satisfied that I do indeed know what I am talking about. However, though she has good reason to think that I am justified in my belief, my knowledge is not yet demonstrated to be true. Suppose that, literally that morning, workmen had come to mend a water leak underneath the very road that I had indicated was much freer of traffic, and that, as a result, a diversion was in operation that took her back into the main flow of vehicles, my knowledge of the quickest route, though justified, would not be true.

This fairly common-place illustration of knowing something to be as we have described it suggests that there are three elements involved in the process of knowing: a belief; the justification, grounds or warrant for that belief, and the demonstration that the belief is not only justified, but also true. Thus, knowledge has been defined as 'justified, true belief.'[8] Justification deals with the reasons for holding

[8] See the discussion in A.C. Grayling, 'Epistemology' in Nicholas Bunnin and E.P. Tsui-James, *The Blackwell Companion to Philosophy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), pp. 38-63. This definition is not without its problems,

a particular belief, the evidence for making statements about some reality, what it is that authorises one to make truth claims. Knowing something is equivalent to ascertaining its status as true.

Epistemology is then dealing with a whole raft of issues fundamental to daily living: "perception, the nature of belief, the role of imagery in memory and introspection, the variety of mental properties figuring in self-knowledge, the nature of inference, and the structure of a person's system of beliefs."[9] To return for a moment to the story of the motorist, my general knowledge of the quickest route to a particular address depends on the constant perception of my surroundings being in accordance with a certain reality on the ground, good reasons for believing that my perceptions are accurate, a reliable memory of the route held in my mind, the inference that on that day all my mental faculties are working smoothly, and that there are no grounds for thinking that I might be deceived.

Of course, when seeking to help someone by giving them directions, we do not reflect on all these matters. We do not test all our mental processes and abilities or go through a check-list of our epistemic virtues as a normal thinking subject, we take them for granted until, or unless, some event causes us to question our putative knowledge of some matter (for example, in this case, that we did not know about the road-works or that we have confused the names of the streets, resulting in sending the poor motorist a long way from where she wishes to be).

So far well and good: we have been describing what might be called a common-sense view of knowledge; one that serves us well in the everyday routine of life. However, if we move on from the common-place question of knowing how to go from A to B by car and ask some basic questions about our overall human experience, the theory of knowledge may take on a more complicated look. These questions relate to the scope of our knowledge, not only about mundane matters (as, for example, how to mend a car engine or cook a *crepe suzette*), but about the meaning of existence, the nature of beauty, whether reality is given or invented, whether anything or anyone exists beyond the universe, about right and wrong action, about identity.

Perhaps the most basic existential questions are: who am I? Why am I here? How should I live? What happens when I die? And, why, apparently, do only human beings of all creatures on earth ask these questions? To what extent, then, is it possible to have justified, true belief about these fundamental issues? It might be accurate to affirm that the major epistemological dilemma of all time is whether it is possible to have justified true belief about the nature and meaning of ultimate reality.

The contention of the papers in this collection is that crucial questions in the field of epistemology are of essential concern to the discipline of missiology, for reasons that will be elucidated further on in this discussion. First, however, it is necessary to

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especially in establishing acceptable criteria for justification. Another difficulty is that there may be cases of justified true belief which are not knowledge. Generally they relate to instances where a justified belief is only true by coincidence. Nevertheless, the concept and reality of knowing something (through common-sense experience) is an indispensable part of discourse. In the absence of a more adequate description, this one emphasises the necessary elements of what counts as knowledge.

[9] Robert Audi, *Epistemology: a contemporary introduction to the theory of knowledge* (London: Routledge, 1998), pp. viii-ix.

review briefly the reasons for concluding that the state of epistemological discourse in the cultural environment of the West is in dire straits.

The nature of the epistemological predicament

At the risk of simplifying too much a complex and continuing debate, the predicament may be defined as how we humans may have access to knowledge of ourselves which matches accurately our total experience of life. The modern world believes, with demonstrable justification, that through the experimental sciences it knows certain truths about how the material world functions. There is, of course, still a debate about whether we have direct access to an external world, or whether that access is mediated by the concepts of the mind through which we interpret to ourselves and to others what we perceive. Nevertheless, in spite of a certain scepticism in some quarters about a direct correspondence between the thing observed and the observer,[10] science is predicated on a philosophical realism that when we make a statement about a matter it is true, whenever what the statement says is true actually is the case, and we can know with a deep assurance that it is the case:[11]

> "Prima facie, it seems obvious that the realist conception is the one we express with 'true', when that predicate is applied to propositions, statements and beliefs. And nothing has turned up to disturb, or even qualify that obviousness. The realist conception remains in possession of the field."[12]

Moreover, the object of observation exists independently of the observer to the extent that, were there to be no observers, the object would still exist just as it does when observed by an intelligent being. This account does not mean that observers do not see different aspects of what they are observing (for example, in the subtle textures of leaves turning colour in the autumn season). However, what they see actually is there; it is not just present in their imagination. When they describe the object of perception (let us say a herd of black and white cows in a field), they are describing the objects, not just what they perceive.

The methods of science, then, assume that investigation and exploration happens because there is a given reality that can be known in itself by the person or team of researchers seeking to understand that reality (for example, the way in which the body defends itself against rogue cells or how it heals itself after being damaged). The material world can be known: we can have true beliefs about natural processes and we can justify those beliefs on the basis of the verification of evidence.

So far there is little controversy about the possibility of acquiring this type of knowledge. The whole enterprise of science continues to build accumulative knowledge on the premise that through empirical demonstration we may acquire an accurate understanding of the functioning of matter and organisms.[13] However, there are some serious questions in epistemology that remain, which science *per se* does not

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[10] See, Barry Stroud, 'Skepticism and the Possibility of Knowledge' in Linda Martin Alcoff (ed.), *Epistemology: The Big Questions* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), pp. 363-365.

[11] See, William P. Alston, *A Realist Conception of Truth* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996), pp. 5-6.

[12] *A Realist Conception*, p. 188.

[13] See, Christopher Norris, *On Truth and Meaning: Language, Logic and the Grounds of Belief* (London: Continuum, 2006), pp. 77-80.

seem able to answer. Is science, *qua science*, able to elucidate the meaning and reasons for the experiences of life that we believe we know about which are not encompassed apparently by the material world? Are there other sources of knowledge which require assessment by other rational disciplines that transcend what scientific methods are capable of delivering? Is it possible to gain knowledge of beliefs that cannot be confirmed or denied by means of scientific experimentation (for example, the belief that it is right not to tell lies or to steal other people's possessions)?[14]

The epistemological predicament is the result of equivocation about the answer to these and other similar queries. Over a period of time, beginning roughly from the end of the 17th century, an intellectual consensus has descended on Western societies that postulates a sharp epistemological distinction between knowledge gained through experimental rational processes based on observation, the elaboration and testing of hypotheses about the natural world and their confirmation or refutation and claims to know the truth about matters which are intrinsically not open to empirical validation.

It is said that there is a radical distinction of epistemic status between knowledge of the natural world, where justified true belief about empirical data demands assent because demonstrable evidence cannot be gainsaid, and beliefs about a non-material world that have to do with such matters as the meaning of human life, ethical values, the existence of evil, suffering, cultural differences and the nature of beauty.[15] In the first case, knowledge based on testable evidence is universally available, is immune from reasonable doubt and entails universal assent. In the second case, claims to knowledge are based on individual or collective opinions. They spring from a range of options about what may be the case about a transcendent ultimate reality; in the nature of the case these do not command consent, because they are based on conjectures that cannot be confirmed or denied by universally compelling examination.

Scientifically-based knowledge, then, is open-ended, always revisable in the light of fresh evidence empirically endorsed; every other kind of knowledge springs from convictions that are based on beliefs about which we can never be assured of their truth-value. Is the existence of the universe due to the gratuitous creative act of an eternally existing personal Spirit? Or, is it intrinsically impossible to know what may have happened at the beginning (if, indeed, there was a beginning)? The modern intellectual consensus says that we cannot know. As it is logically impossible to prove a negative, we cannot affirm the truth that God does not exist and did not create all matter *ex nihilo*, nor can we assert that matter could not have come into existence by

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[14] People still attracted by some form of logical positivism may make a strong distinction between facts and values, in the sense that commitment to notions of right and wrong is interpreted as a description of a person's expression of approval or disapproval of a particular action. According to this view, the key to distinguishing ethical judgements is in the personal motivation to endorse or recoil from certain conduct; see, Hilary Putnam, *The Collapse of the Fact/Value Dichotomy and Other Essays* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), pp. 35-38.

[15] J. P. Moreland, in his essay, 'The Image of God and the Failure of Scientific Atheism,' in Craig, William Lane and Meister Chad (eds), *God is Great, God is Good: Why Believing in God is Reasonable and Responsible* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2009), lists five recalcitrant features of human experience that evade a plausible explanation on the basis of scientific naturalism: consciousness and mental processes; free will; rationality; the self and intrinsic, equal value.

some kind of spontaneous activity. So, what we believe will be the result of social and cultural factors such as family influences, education, the media and our circle of friends. Putative knowledge of a non-empirical world is at best justified belief; its truth value, however, is not ascertainable.

For the moment, we can leave a description of the predicament at this point. We are dealing with deeply-rooted epistemological perceptions. We can safely say that, as translated into educational practice, for example, this narrative has gained a kind of default position in Western societies. It is part of an intellectual plausibility structure that undergirds all academically-respectable discourse. As we shall see later, there is much more to be said about this apparent dichotomy, this split in the faculty of knowledge into two unequal parts. The reasoning is not quite so straightforward as the standard account makes it out to be. There are serious considerations which are ignored in a scientifically-driven environment which chooses to disregard the in-completeness and partiality of its outlook. These form part of Christian mission in its dialogue with what has become an alternative system of belief.

The consequences of the epistemological predicament

The most obvious consequence is the disintegration of a unified field of knowledge that encompasses an understanding of both the external world of material objects, data and processes and a human being's internal world where the uniquely human notions of purpose, imagination, planning, conscience, consciousness, creativity, inter-personal relations and aesthetic appreciation are experienced as an undeniable part of our self-awareness. For the first world, we believe we have good grounds for knowing with certainty the reality that is conveyed to us through our physical senses. For the second world, in trying to give a coherent and plausible explanation of our own humanity, we are cast adrift on the sea of diverse and often incompatible theories, whose truth, or otherwise, cannot be assessed by means of a universally credible standard of belief. Here we enter the region of religions, philosophies and ideologies: 'grand-narratives' which claim to know the truth which will comprehen-sibly explain our experience. The problem is that there is no agreed way of deciding between their various interpretations.

Western culture has accepted, promoted and now has to live with a fundamental sacred-secular divide. Whereas formerly the culture took for granted an under-standing of the world which included the communication of knowledge from beyond the material, now it has, to use a phrase made current by Don Cupitt, 'taken leave of God.' As the scientific enterprise achieved a kind of exponential success in dis-covering the workings of the natural world, so the necessity of a supreme being to help fill in the gaps of knowledge diminished. The so-called 'God hypothesis' appeared to become increasingly tenuous. For many scientists and writers Darwin's theory of adaptation and mutation through natural selection seemed to give an exhaustive and adequate account of how the different species (including *homo sapiens*) came to be. It was put forward as a much more satisfactory alternative to the concept of 'intelligent design' by an interventionist, non-material creator.[16]

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[16] See, Alister McGrath, *The Foundations of Dialogue in Science and Religion* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), p. 174.

Indeed, it was assumed that in order to safeguard the integrity of the sciences from extraneous interference from metaphysical speculation it was necessary to begin with an assumption of methodological naturalism.[17] Scientists, working within the confines of the natural world, cannot consider any explanatory hypothesis that accounts for the reality of observation that is not intrinsically open to testable procedures recognised by normal scientific processes of confirmation. So, any claim to a super-natural explanation of the existence of life, biological diversity and increasing complexity has to be bracketed out of the equation. Science can offer no opinion about such an explanation.

Now, in theory, this methodological naturalist stance does not rule out a theistic account of the origin and development of the universe. However, in practice, there is a certain impulse towards assuming that the tools of investigation that science has honed over many generations are sufficient to supply us with all the knowledge we need in order to grasp fully the reasons for the whole of our experience. This move from methodological naturalism to a form of metaphysical naturalism is what Mikael Stenmark calls 'scientific expansionism'.[18] He describes scientific expansionists as those who

> "argue that the boundaries of science should be extended so that it includes values or value questions; but it must also be possible for them to claim that, for instance, all beliefs that can be known or even rationally maintained must and can be included within the boundaries of science. Science sets on such an account the limits for what we possibly can know about reality; the only kind of knowledge that we can have is scientific knowledge."[19]

Stenmark believes that it is precisely in the area of evolutionary biology that the greatest claims are being made for a scientific explanation of the whole of reality. He quotes, among others, Richard Alexander, Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Michael Ruse and Edward Wilson to the end that "the evolutionary epic provides us with a new mythology", which can be called 'scientific materialism.' Not only will this new narrative be able to explain satisfactorily the evolutionary reasons for the old religion – to give an objective sense of absolute moral obligation, in order to counteract the unmitigating, inbred selfishness of the urge to survive – but it will constitute a new unifying epistemological norm that will give wholly satisfactory (and accurate) accounts of ontological realities.[20] In other words, it will function as a quasi-religion, able to answer, within its own terms, our deepest existential questions.

The argument can be reversed. According to a scientific account of rationality, which accepts as an axiom that nothing may be believed that is not demonstrable by appeal to well-grounded evidence, and seeing that religion cannot produce such evidence for its claims (i.e. evidence that will pass the test of manifest corroboration or refutation), religion has to be located in the sphere of myth, in its negative sense of a human

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[17] See, Robert T. Pennock, 'Naturalism, Evidence and Creationism: The Case of Philip Johnson' in Robert T. Pennock (ed.), *Intelligent Design Creationism and its Critics: Philosophical, Theological and Scientific Perspectives* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2001), pp. 77-95.

[18] See, *How to Relate Science and Religion* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), pp. 5-9.

[19] *How to Relate*, p. xi.

[20] *How to Relate*, pp. 5-9, 30.

created account of existence designed to offer an explanation in areas of life hitherto inexplicable. In other words, religion will always suffer from a God-of-the-gaps syndrome. As scientific explanations expand, so the domain of religion will increasingly shrink. This phenomenon is precisely what is being witnessed to in the secular cultures of the West; intellectual sophistication is incompatible with a belief in non-material entities and their presumed influence on the material world, which alone we can know that we know.

Now, if it were true that the only justified true belief that we were able to acquire is that which is ascertainable through the natural sciences, there would be no disintegration of a unified field of knowledge. Knowledge would simply be confined, by definition, to those matters empirically substantiated. All other claims would be relegated to a nether region of fantasy. According to one's predilection this region could be described either as useful fiction, having the pragmatic value of helping human beings continue to cope with the seeming anomalies and absurdities of life (such as the existence of gratuitous violence, unmerited suffering, the meaninglessness of toil and the inability of possessions – either goods or human relationships – to satisfy the deepest and most persistent of human longings to be of worth and to be loved) or it could be depicted as a dangerous delusion, based on false hopes and promises.

It is, of course, the case that those who believe in the reality of a divine presence who inhabits a non-material realm also believe that the material world, however well understood, can intrinsically never supply answers to uniquely human questions. According to this view, scientific materialism is built upon a number of well-rehearsed fallacies: the two most important are the *deontic*, which seeks to deduce moral principles from statements of fact, "an illegitimate procedure, since premises of one logical type (descriptive judgements) cannot give rise to premises of another type (namely, prescriptions) "and the *naturalistic*, which "confuses natural properties, like musical accomplishment, with moral properties, like virtue."[21]

Perhaps, even more important, the usual explanation given for religious belief – that its origin lies in the various needs that human beings seem to have for life in a civilised community (e.g. moral authority, a sense of worth, hope in the future, the assurance of being loved, justice, equality, an explanation of evil, etc.) being projected outwards towards a self-created super-hero who supplies all these things (the *genetic* fallacy) – is not itself a scientific explanation. It is a matter of conjecture built upon assumptions which are wholly beyond scientific methodology to prove or disprove. The problem with scientific materialism is that we 'know' (we have a justified rational certainty) that we experience these needs without, however, being able to account for them. The scientific expansionist claims do a great disservice to science; by claiming

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[21] J. Andrew Kirk, *The Future of Reason, Science and Faith: Following Modernity and Post-modernity* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2007), p. 171. Hilary Putnam, who argues against the fact/value split, maintains that the use of 'thick' ethical concepts, like cruel, is more than mere description. To call an action cruel, he thinks, already contains an evaluative principle, present before the judgement has been made. In this sense, but only in this sense, the value is contained within the description of the fact. However, the value has not been derived from the fact, see 'The Entanglement of Fact and Value' (chapter 2), in *The Collapse of the Fact/Value Dichotomy*.

too much they are in danger of creating disillusionment among a public taught to rely on the supposed findings of scientific research. All in all, then, as long as there is no credible source of information that would explain our self-awareness, the dis-integration of the whole field of knowledge remains.

The research question

The nature of the epistemological predicament and its consequences is the context for the unfolding of the research summarised in the articles that follow. The question that needs to be explored has to do with an authentic Christian response to a dilemma, which has a philosophical dimension but also existential significance. Can Christian mission in the 21st century be construed in such a way that it addresses an issue located mainly in the thinking mind? Is the problem of justified true belief about every aspect of life a valid frontier for the Christian message to cross? If it is, how should one begin to engage with the matter? The pieces of writing selected for this dissertation attempt to locate the problem and then begin to offer a qualified rejoinder. They attempt to probe the implications for missiology of a massive cultural shift that has taken place in the course of the history of the West over the last three hundred years. In this respect, they form one possible response to Lesslie Newbigin's call to construct a coherent missiological approach to contemporary Western culture.[22]

The case to be investigated

The articles explore the fruitfulness of one particular hypothesis, firmly rooted in history, for a contemporary missiological engagement with the culture of the West in the area of epistemology. The hypothesis states that the main cause of the epistemological predicament outlined above is the failure on the part of Europe's intellectual tradition to maintain a unified account of knowledge that would hold together a true perception of both the external and internal worlds of human experience. This failure arose, beginning in the latter part of the 17th century, when the truth about the meaning of human existence became divorced from the truth about the functioning of the material environment in which human beings live and move and have their being.

This separation of two sources of knowing may be expressed as a divorce between the word and world of God. Within a Christian interpretation of reality it was assumed that God as creator and redeemer spoke through both his special revelation, conveyed by specially chosen prophets and apostles through the Biblical message, and his general revelation conveyed in the complex and subtle workings of the material creation. It was assumed, moreover, that these two revelations, though disclosing different aspects of knowledge about the whole of reality, nevertheless cohered. Finally, it was assumed that only as the two were maintained intact and inseparable would human beings have access to a full body of knowledge sufficient to live a

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[22] See, for example, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (London: SPCK, 1989); *Truth to Tell: The Gospel as Public Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991); *Truth and Authority in Modernity* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1996), and many other writings.

thoroughly fulfilled existence. People can, on this account, only understand their true nature and destiny as they attend assiduously to both 'books.'[23] Each needs to be kept open and read for cross-referencing.

In what might be called, perhaps rather dramatically, intellectual suicide, scientists and philosophers began to discard one of the two books, in the belief (or hope) that the other would render all the knowledge necessary for a considered life. At the time, they began to believe that knowledge gained through scientific investigation would reveal a whole new world unimagined by any previous generation. The wave of new discoveries helped to fuel the rising tide of optimism that nothing would be beyond human beings powers of discernment through the use of the emerging scientific disciplines.

At the same time, a sense of relief swept through the academic establishments of Europe that for the first time in history humanity might be free from the doctrinaire teaching of an authoritarian church. Now, through credible methods of empirical research and a scientifically-trained use of reason, all claims to truth could be sifted to judge their credentials and their warrant. By and large the claims for the book of God's word were found unconvincing or even misleading. Humanity was entering a new stage of 'enlightenment' urged on by Kant's famous call, *Sapere aude* ('dare to be wise'):

> "*Enlightenment is man's emergence from his self-incurred immaturity. Immaturity* is the inability to use one's own understanding without the guidance of another. This immaturity is *self-incurred* if its cause is not lack of understanding, but lack of resolution and courage to use it without the guidance of another."[24]

So, the book of God's word was firmly shut and, to all intents and purposes, locked and the key thrown away.

The Enlightenment seemed like a new dawning of human understanding and endeavour, a new world emancipated from the old world of superstition and fable. It was modernity in contrast to a pre-modernity that reflected another era, another set of presuppositions, a wholly different mentality.[25] From this transitionary phase arose, either as a development of or a reaction to the Enlightenment all the subsequent philosophical and cultural movements of the West. However, having consciously abandoned the notion that truth may be discovered by paying attention to divine revelation, Western culture has been forced to hope against hope that somehow knowledge of the imminent world will make up for the loss. As we have seen, that has proved not to be the case. Attempts to harness reason alone or to use the gift of

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[23] The term is used by Francis Bacon in the Third Book of *De Augmentis Scientarum* (1623), in which he "draws a distinction between the revealed knowledge of the divine and sensory or natural knowledge. He makes the distinction, not to suggest a radical divergence between them, but to point to the distinct methods by which knowledge in each case is to be appropriated", see, *The Future of Reason,* pp. 37-40.

[24] Immanuel Kant, 'An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?' in Hand Reiss (ed.), *Kant's Political Writings* (trans. By H.B. Nisbet) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), p. 54.

[25] The process has been extensively explored by Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007). I give a brief summary and analysis of the book in J. Andrew Kirk, 'A Secular Age in mission perspective' in a forthcoming edition of *Transformation.* The book by Richard Tarnas, *The Passion of the Western Mind: Understanding the Ideas that have shaped our Worldview* (London: Pimlico, 1991) also gives a penetrating account of the historical shifts in thinking that have led to the current epistemological impasse.

language to discover the nature of *Being* have floundered on the inevitably incompleteness of knowledge based on the material world alone.[26]
Having discussed the probable main historical causes for the current epistemological predicament, this dissertation also attempts to test the hypothesis that the Christian faith, based on the received understanding of the Bible as God's word, as commonly expressed in all Christian traditions, possesses a superior explanatory and re-creative power in comparison with all major alternatives – philosophical, ideological, and religious. This takes us into the theme of dialogue and to mission as dialogue, but in an area of engagement little explored hitherto in the field of missiology.

Methodologies of research

The fundamental epistemological question has to be, what is required if we are to obtain justified true belief about matters that cannot be settled by appeal to empirical data alone? The only hope of gaining knowledge about realities beyond the competence of the experimental sciences to discover, and that we know we are not deceived into thinking exist, is to have access to a different source of understanding. We are talking here of a different category: one which cannot ultimately be measured by scientific criteria. There are basically only two alternatives: either this knowledge comes from deep within the (collective) psyche of the human being or it comes from a source external to the human race.
In the first case, we would refer to what might be called the collective wisdom of the ages: human beings from different times and places reflecting on what they observe about human behaviour from within the resources of their own mental abilities and intuitions. They are seeking to obey the injunction to "buy truth…buy wisdom, instruction and understanding" (Prov. 23.23). People, naturally, do not acquire knowledge by themselves. They are reliant on the accumulated wisdom of others, which is passed on down the generations through teaching and example. Sometimes this wisdom will be distilled in proverbs, stories, sayings and parables. It will provide a certain amount of insight into the ambiguous condition of human existence. Sometimes it will come as a consequence of deep reflective rational thought as in the case of the various schools of philosophy that have existed in East and West. Sometimes this wisdom will be cast in the form of religious legends, with an appeal to God or the gods to sanction what has been discovered by human intelligence.
In the second case, a more substantial claim is being made. Three main religious traditions (Judaism, Christianity and Islam)[27] affirm that their teaching is derived from the revelation that comes from the one and only existing divine being, who inhabits eternity, the creator of all that is. They claim that this revelation has been transmitted through human language (Hebrew, Greek or Arabic) by people specially chosen by the subject of the revelation. This claim makes a number of assumptions: that such a divine being exists, entirely independently of human existence and thought

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[26] Further on this, see *The Future of Reason*, chapters 3, 4, 5 and 6.
[27] It should be mentioned that the Mormon faith makes a similar claim based on the Book of Mormon, whilst some religious groups claim a special interpretation of existing Scriptures (e.g. The Jehovah's Witnesses).

(ontological theistic realism[28]); that such a being is capable of communicating with human beings; that the communication is cast in words and images that are intelligible to humans; that those who receive the communication are able to transmit it faithfully to others for whom it is also intelligible. These are strategic claims, but they represent the minimum assumptions necessary, if there is going to be a source of justified true belief extrinsic to purely human ruminations.

Whatever the arguments for and against this source of knowledge, it is clear that the claim, if it be true, fulfils the criteria for an additional origin of knowledge not accessible by means of human observation of and experimentation upon the natural world. As a principle, then, it is justified belief, in that there is nothing contradictory or absurd about proposing that such knowledge exists, and there is considerable circumstantial evidence that it does. However, the question about its truth remains, i.e. does it communicate a reliable perception about the way things ultimately are? And by what criteria could we judge its truth value?

Given that claims to revelation and affirmations about wisdom and understanding of the human condition come in many varieties (often discrepant), it will not be easy to settle these questions. However, there is one heuristic device, which might serve as a fruitful tool for concluding what is the ultimate truth of the matter, which is worth exploring. This is known as 'Inference to the Best Explanation' (henceforth IBE). This is the tool that I propose to investigate as a means of engaging in dialogue with the epistemological dilemmas of current Western culture.[29] In brief, IBE makes the assumption, based on logical reasoning and evidence, that

> "our explanatory considerations guide our inferences. Beginning with the evidence available to us, we infer what would, if true, provide the best explanation of that evidence." [30]

In his study of this axiom, Peter Lipton argues that this is the method we most normally use when seeking to infer a conclusion from some piece of evidence that has forced its attention upon us. Thus, "we do often use how well a hypothesis would explain as a barometer of how likely it is that the hypothesis is correct".[31] There are two particular mechanisms by which the method proceeds. The first is a contrastive procedure: 'best' implies the most persuasive among a number of alternative hypotheses; it seeks to answer the question 'why *this* account of reality rather than *that*? The second is to keep a distinction between what Lipton calls 'the likeliest' and 'the loveliest' explanation, i.e. a "distinction between the explanation most warranted by the evidence…and the explanation which would, if true, provide the most

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[28] For the meaning of realism in relation to God, see Peter Byrne, *God and Realism* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2003) pp. 1-20.

[29] George Schlesinger, *Religion and Scientific Method* (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1977) has defended religion as a rational enterprise by using IBE. Philip Dowe, *Galileo, Darwin and Hawking: The Interplay of Science, Reason and Religion* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), p. 103, has also suggested that "the method of IBE…can also be used to justify the rationality of belief in God." He allows that the methodology of science can be applied to religion, as there is a common rationality shared by religion and science. So far, however, I have not yet come across anyone who has explored the fruitfulness of the method in seeking to resolve the epistemological dilemma of our times.

[30] Peter Lipton, *Inference to the Best Explanation* (London: Routledge, 2004/2), p. 1.

[31] *Inference to the Best Explanation*, p. 208.

understanding."[32] He also argues that we should keep in mind a differential between potential and actual explanation, such that instances of inference to the best potential explanation are inferences that the latter are of engaging actual explanations.

I claim that this heuristic device is an excellent, indeed the most adequate, way of engaging in a dialogue between the Christian faith (understood in Trinitarian theistic terms) and the epistemological predicament of secular, Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment culture. I argue that it proceeds in ways substantially similar to the processes of the law-courts, which aim to discover, 'beyond all reasonable doubt,' what is the truth of the matter in the case of someone accused of a felony. By means of the sifting of testimonial and forensic evidence and deductive reasoning, the court proceeds to the making of a judgement about the best explanation regarding the circumstances surrounding a particular crime. The prosecution marshals evidence that points to the accused, whilst the defence produces evidence for an alternative explanation. The jury is then given the task of deciding which evidence is most likely to be true to the facts of the case.

I further argue that this method may become a missiological project in which the Christian faith (understood in terms of Trinitarian theistic realism) is the best of all possible explanations of our unique experience of the universe as human beings: one which offers the most coherent, consistent, and complete account. The theory's explanatory power is measured by its observational success in accounting for data already accepted as veridical, and for new data. It also scores well in its predictive ability with regard to human behaviour (i.e. what is likely to happen, if certain courses of action are followed).[33] The advantage of adopting the model for the purposes of dialogue is that it takes account of universally-available evidence and proven categories of rational argument. The truth-claims that are made are related to self-awareness, human experience of the world, the universal concourse of alternative traditions, ideas and explanations and are open to a critical exchange of views. Therefore, when it comes to assessing the causes of the epistemological predicament of the West and possible responses, it has great missiological potential.

However, there are two major problems with the method that need to be addressed before we can conclude that this is a missiological project worth taking up. First, there are doubts about the viability of the method itself. Secondly, there are doubts about whether the Christian faith is in the business of giving explanations at all. We continue, then, by considering each of these potential uncertainties in turn.

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[32] *Inference to the Best Explanation*, p. 207.

[33] An example of explanatory prediction might be a prognosis of the consequences that will inevitably follow a deficit of proper care, security and affection for the emotional stability of children. The ability to anticipate certain behavioural outcomes in these circumstances is derived from an understanding of how human beings are created to function best within a stable and cherishing family environment.

Inference to the best explanation – is it a valid procedure?

Several difficulties concerning the theory have been articulated in the philosophy of science.[34] These can only be dealt with here in a concise manner, as a full treatment would take us beyond the scope of this introduction.[35] First, there is the question of what makes one explanation better than another. This has been called the challenge of *identification*. The problem here is to give an adequate account of the explanatory virtues, i.e. the features of explanation that are most convincing in contributing to the degree of understanding they provide. In general, "better explanations explain more types of phenomena, explain them with greater precision, provide more information about underlying mechanisms, unify apparently disparate phenomena, or simplify our overall picture of the world."[36] As well, better explanations are those which are able to clarify complex phenomena, without avoiding or shelving difficult issues. They are also those best able to handle satisfactorily objections to the explanations and recalcitrant evidence. Clearly, a best explanation is one that surpasses alternative explanations in its descriptive power and is also able to account for their existence.

Secondly, there is a question about the correspondence between the most likely and the loveliest explanations. This is referred to as the challenge of *matching*. The question here concerns the coincidence between the features, noted above, that tend to lend support to the best explanation of a phenomenon or set of phenomena and the features that lend support to a hypothesis "that explain many observed phenomena to a high degree of accuracy."[37] Some people have suggested that IBE argues in a circle, because the only way the theory can claim to be an independent source of justified true belief is by relying on familiar inductive reasoning, which is then made the basis of concluding that the best explanation is the correct (or true) explanation.[38] However, a reasonable distinction can be made between the two forms of inference.

Inductive inference deals with relevant evidence that supports a hypothesis and can be used *ex hypothesi* to test the accuracy of the hypothesis given the evidence germane to the case. Inference to the best explanation takes the process one stage further on by dealing with alternative explanations of the same evidence, in order to show which is the most plausible given that it explains the widest possible range of available evidence. The process is well illustrated in the case of a criminal investigation. A crime has been committed. The investigators assemble all the evidence that appears to bear on the case, in the course of which they probably eliminate some evidence as being unconnected or peripheral. They form a hypothesis about who may have committed the crime (i.e. they construct a profile of the most likely perpetrator), and then look again at the evidence to test whether it does indeed point in the right

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[34] These are summarised and answered in Peter Lipton, 'Inference to the Best Explanation' in W.H. Newton-Smith (ed.), *A Companion to the Philosophy of Science* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), pp. 184-193.

[35] In my estimation, the deeper philosophical complexities of objections to the theory are dealt with adequately by Lipton in *Inference to the Best Explanation* and in the relevant sections of Martin Curd and J.A. Cover (eds.), *Philosophy of Science: The Central Issues* (New York: W.W.Norton, 1998).

[36] *A Companion to the Philosophy of Science*, p. 187.

[37] *A Companion to the Philosophy of Science*, p. 188.

[38] See, Richard Fumerton, 'Inference to the best explanation' in Jonathan Dancy and Ernest Sosa (eds.), *A Companion to Epistemology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), pp. 208-9.

direction. They then make an arrest and charge someone (or group of people) with committing the crime. However, when it comes to the trial, the defence lawyers argue that the evidence could point to an alternative explanation and that, as a result, the prosecution's case is explanatorily insufficient, and hence unsound. Or, they may argue that the evidence is insufficient (in philosophical terms 'underdetermined').

The whole case, then, rests on which explanation is the best (beyond reasonable doubt), or whether there is a third or fourth explanation that would do even better. The conclusion that the judge or jury may come to is that one explanation is overwhelmingly more warranted than any other and, with great probability, is true. Or, they may decide that none of the alternative explanations are sufficiently strong to justify a conviction (beyond reasonable doubt). The case then is either dismissed or sent for a re-trial. This example, hopefully, clarifies the distinction between explanations that account for a given effect (the likeliest) and those that help to resolve a conflict that may arise when more than one likely explanation is submitted for consideration. This procedure, as we will hope to demonstrate, is important when it comes to using IBE as a heuristic tool in missiological dialogue.

Thirdly, there is a question about the reliability of inductive practices. This is the challenge of *justification*. The challenge was laid down well over two hundred years ago by the Scottish philosopher David Hume.[39] He argued that the most fundamental problem of inductive justification is that there is no good reason to believe that our inductive practices, that take us from true observations to true hypotheses or predictions, are reliable. All inductive arguments for induction beg the question they are supposed to be answering, whilst deductive arguments, based on the reliability of past observations, do not guarantee that induction will be reliable in the future. This is Hume's sceptical reservation about the value of the inductive process. As a theory, it is difficult to refute on its own terms. However, in practice in order for real life scientific or judicial judgements to be accepted as cogent, it has to be ignored, for it would make all scientific theories, hypotheses and predictions unbelievable. Although always revisable, scientific theories are cumulative in the impact they make on the probability that they are true. It would, therefore, be entirely unreasonable, and counter to scientific experimentation, always to suspend judgement about the reliability of accumulated observation.

As a matter of fact, in his argument against miracles, Hume breaks his own methodological scepticism. On the one hand, he appears to argue that

> "the only basis for distinguishing real law-like (nomological) generalisations from those based on accidental regularities is the evidence the mind adduces for the former but not the latter. Law-like generalisations flow from the quantity and variety of evidence that impinges upon our mental faculties not from the unchangeable reality of the external world."[40]

On the other hand, in his well-known argument against miracles, he gives the impression of appealing precisely to that which exists objectively in the external world:

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[39] See, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (Oxford: OUP, 1999, first published in 1777).

[40] *The Future of Reason*, p. 63.

> "A miracle is a violation of *the laws of nature*; and as a form and unalterable experience has established these laws, the proof against a miracle, from the very nature of the fact, is as entire as any argument from experience can possibly be imagined."[41]

It will be noted that Hume, in order to argue his case against miracles, has moved surreptitiously from *law-like generalisations* to *the laws of nature*. However, on his account of induction, there are no such things as laws of nature, only that every "individual's experience of past occurrences is uniform and regular." Now, he seems to be arguing that "all past occurrences have been uniform and regular, in accordance with laws."[42] Mentioning this apparent contradiction is not intended, in this instance, to be a refutation of Hume's objection to miracles, but rather a comment on his view of induction as a problem for the axiom about IBE. Though Hume would have strongly rejected the ascription, he seems to have adopted here a realist assumption about an external world, existing independently of human experience. Otherwise, his argument against miracles based on customary experience simply begs the question.

As a matter of fact, it is by not attending to the argument from best explanation that miracles may be ruled out of court *a priori*. Hume based his argument on the direct testimony of individuals, which overwhelmingly witnesses against the occurrence of apparently inexplicable anomalous occurrences. However, he neglected to mention the possibility (even probability) that there may also be indirect testimony to an event having happened. And, when this testimony is taken into account (for example, in the case of the resurrection of Christ, the empty tomb and the radical change in the disciples), it provides evidence that can only be explained by accepting the hypothesis that an irregular or abnormal event did indeed happen. Hume's argument rules out the possibility of miracles *per se*; the argument for the possibility of miracles, however, attends to all the evidence (direct and indirect) germane to the case, before coming to a conclusion about which theory best explains the data.

From this rather extended discussion, it is legitimate to draw the conclusion that the principal objections to the principle of IBE can be met. Now, speaking about miracles, the philosopher Hilary Putnam has put forward an argument (that has come to be known as the miracle argument)[43] for applying the principle in defense of scientific realism, "according to which there are good reasons to believe that well-supported theories are likely to be approximately true" rather than just "empirically adequate:"

> "Suppose that all the many and varied predictions derived from a particular scientific theory are found to be correct: what is the best explanation of the predictive success? …the best explanation is that the theory itself is true. If the theory were true, then the truth of its deductive consequences would follow as a matter of course; but if the hypothesis were false, it would be a "miracle" that all its observed consequences were found to be correct. So, by a philosophical

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[41] 'On Miracles' in *An Enquiry*, p. 173 (emphasis added).

[42] J. A. Cover, 'Miracles and (Christian) Theism' in Eleonore Stump and Michael J. Murray (eds.), *Philosophy of Religion: The Big Questions* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), p. 340.

[43] The original publication of the argument occurs in the article, 'What is Realism?' in Jarrett Leplin (ed.), *Scientific Realism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

> (procedure) of Inference to the Best Explanation, we are entitled to infer that the theory is true, since the "truth explanation" is the best explanation of the theory's predictive success."[44]

Although the model proves itself to be "an illuminating description of some of the general inferential principles that guide scientific practice,"[45] it has not yet been established that, by analogy, it could be used to overcome the deep epistemological predicament that is the focus of this study. Straightaway we come up against the objection that this is an illegitimate use of the model in the context of supporting the truth claims of Christian faith. To this objection we now turn.

The Christian faith – is its purpose to give explanations?

Stenmark discusses the proposition, neatly outlined by Peacocke, that

> "many Christian beliefs are potential explanations: they tell why certain data that need to be explained are the way they are; they account for certain facts about human existence. When I believe them, I believe they do a better job of explaining the data than the other explanatory hypotheses of which I am aware."[46]

This is set in the context of a claim that Christian faith shares the same understanding of rationality as that used in science, namely that

> "the proper way to use or exercise human cognitive resources is to treat our beliefs as hypotheses which explain certain data and which should weigh against competing explanatory hypotheses and which we should seek to inter-subjectively assess according to the criteria of comprehensiveness, fruitfulness, general cogency, and so on."[47]

In other words the assessment is carried out by employing the process of IBE. However, as an account of how Christian belief is acquired and exercised this model has been criticised as demanding acceptance of belief in God as a hypothesis which works in the same way as those employed in the scientific field. This implies that it is only rational to believe in God if "this belief fulfils the same or at least similar standards of rationality as scientific hypotheses do."[48]

Stenmark argues that there are good reasons to doubt that belief in God is a hypothesis. Firstly, for religious practitioners belief in God is primarily grounded in direct experience of something (someone) beyond the mundane, physical world. Therefore, secondly, belief in God cannot be made to depend on the acceptability of evidence that passes scientific scrutiny. Thus, even if we cannot find support for this kind of evidence, the credibility of faith in God would not be undermined, for belief in God is not held on the basis of other beliefs that function as evidence. Thirdly, if belief in God depended on scientifically approved evidential support, faith would never be properly open to doubt. But faith is not truly itself, unless there are also elements of doubt that cannot be removed by appeal to a scientifically-based

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[44] *A Companion to the Philosophy of Science*, p. 191.
[45] *A Companion to the Philosophy of Science*, p. 192.
[46] Peacocke, *Paths from Science towards God* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2001), p. 29.
[47] *How to Relate Science and Religion* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2004), p. 118.
[48] *How to Relate Science and Religion*, p. 74.

rationality. Faith ceases to be such, if it is compelled through the use of demonstrable evidence. Such evidence does not exist in the case of belief in God, as the arguments against the existence of God from the problem of evil and the apparent purposelessness of the evolutionary process demonstrate.

This line of argument, in my judgement, misses the point about the use of IBE as a methodological tool for confirming both the likelihood and the explanatory beauty of the existence of an infinite personal God as the reason and cause for all that exists. It confuses the way in which a person may come to believe in this God with rational reflection on the probability that this belief is true. There may be many ways in which a person comes to a personal faith in the transcendent God of Christian theism, such as a direct encounter with the person of Jesus Christ as portrayed in the New Testament or through the testimony of a Christian whose transformed life is taken to show the presence of a transcendent power at work. However there should be no objection to, indeed there should be a positive endorsement of, the attempt to show that such a belief alone does justice to the full range of human experience, both of the material world and of self-awareness. So, faith may be elicited by means other than a convincing rational argument, although part of the process of initial believing will engage cognitive faculties; faith will be deepened, nevertheless, by considering how it may also account for the methods of scientific rationality. In this way it is a source for showing how it provides the best explanation for the two instances of justified true belief about which this thesis is written.

In conclusion to this part of the discussion, we can propose that belief in God and belief in the existence of events in the natural world are similar in their rational structure. Stenmark argues, mistakenly in my opinion, that typically belief in God is a direct knowledge claim, whilst belief in other unobservable entities (electrons, natural selection, gravity, thought processes) are indirect knowledge claims, in that they are known to be true by inference from other beliefs. It may be true that people can have a direct experience of God, apart from the mediation of rationally examinable evidence, but that experience would remain vulnerable to mood swings and alternative experiences, unless grounded on more substantial evidence that is not affected by an individual's emotional situation at any given moment.

Thus, the argument from IBE is not intended to act as a first demonstration of the existence of God, but as a complimentary way of showing that, given the existence of God, all our experience fits into a comprehensive, coherent pattern of understanding. Alternatively, without this hypothesis, life is fragmented, uncoordinated, experienced as a series of unrelated episodes. In other words, the theory is able to fulfil what it promises: to be the best explanation of existence in the universe.

Summary

The argument of this thesis has a number of complementary features. Firstly, it alleges that in current Western thought there is a hitherto unresolved epistemological predicament that has the effect of making impossible a unified field of knowledge that encompasses the whole of human experience. Secondly, it seeks to show that the predicament has arisen, due to particular historical circumstances, because a wedge has been driven between knowledge based on the empirical procedures of the natural

sciences and knowledge based on disclosures that come from an extra-material source. Thirdly, it claims that, as long as these two sources of knowledge are not brought together into a coherent ontology of existence in the universe, the predicament will remain unresolvable. Fourthly, it argues that, for reasons of its humanisation project, the Christian faith has a missiological responsibility to see if there may be a way of resolving the dilemma. Fifthly, it suggests that engaging with the epistemological predicament of the West is a legitimate sphere for an inter-cultural dialogue. Finally, it explores the possibility that the heuristic mechanism known as IBE could be a creative means of ensuring that the dialogue is fruitful. In order to show the discursive potential of IBE, the thesis concludes with two major examples of how it can serve as a dialogical tool within a missiological context.

The purpose, then, of the discussion of IBE in this Introduction is to suggest a method of dialogue that is specifically attuned to the main subject of the thesis, namely the analysis of an epistemological predicament in Western thought from a Christian theistic perspective. The discussion at the end of the thesis is designed to show how the method works as a method of dialogue, giving examples in the fields of scientific assumptions and processes and ethical decision-making.

I am making out a case for saying that IBE is both a method of dialogue and a research method. The first option is not under dispute, for it has already (perhaps not by this name) been proven fruitful in those areas of dialogue normally associated with missiology, namely inter-cultural and inter-faith encounter. How then could it be justified as a research method? I would argue that it is already set up and used as both a method of discovery and a method of confirmation in the experimental sciences and, therefore, by inference can be applied (with caution) to issues in areas of philosophy (such as epistemology in general and moral reasoning) with a view to testing hypotheses and tentative claims about the nature of reality.

IBE is not intended to be the main topic of the thesis, although I would claim that the way I have presented it and the reasons for citing it as a dialogical method in the context of Western epistemological thought may be considered original. I also believe that the link between mission, dialogue and the exercise of IBE may also be innovative.

What I intend to present in this thesis is a coherent account of a way of engaging with a particular problem in the current intellectual tradition of the West (namely, its epistemological predicament), which has Christian missiological implications. The purpose of the articles, then, is to explore the nature of the predicament and to show why it is a problem in epistemology and how this affects human life existentially (in terms of identity – giving an account of self-perception) and ethically (in terms of having an adequate basis for moral judgements). At the same time, I believe that IBE is implicit within this discussion in the sense that I am referring constantly to alternatives to the uniform modernistic and post-modernistic attempts to make sense of knowledge about the whole of reality.

The reason for including two articles on issues to do with multi-religious discourse is by way of showing how, in my opinion, the area most associated with dialogue in missiological study relates to dialogue in the sense in which I am exploring it as a missiological question. In the first article, I am arguing that the basic secular

substratum of Western European society constrains the type of inter-religious dialogue that is meaningful in this context. I am also arguing that, implicitly, Christian faith will react differently from most other religions to the challenge of the secular, just because, in part, secular consciousness derives from the Christian world-view. Finally, I suggest that religion (or spirituality) will not necessarily lessen in a secular environment, but will certainly take a different path. These factors impinge heavily on the nature of dialogue. They demonstrate too, in my opinion, the failure of secular humanist thought, due to the dichotomy that it has tacitly accepted between the sacred and the secular, to be able to explain the enduring reality of religious aspirations. In terms, therefore, of IBE it does not have a convincing explanation of the phenomenon.

In the second article, I am arguing that the pluralist thesis concerning the inter-relationship of differing religious systems of belief is culturally determined. I put forward the thesis that, although it may not be the originator of pluralism, post-modern perspectivism is highly congenial, as an epistemological position, to a pluralist outlook. Thus the same epistemological assumptions underlie both post-modernity and the defense of religious pluralism. By the same token, they both fall to the same critique.

AN ENIGMA AND AN IDEA[49]

The importance of the case

The discussion, which follows, will begin to explore a theory, which might help explain a vexing social and cultural enigma which has dogged the history of the West for over 300 years. Like other investigations it will seek to understand and interpret complex evidence, with a view to suggesting a possible solution. Modernity, as an amalgam of intellectual convictions and social change (namely, the confidence in reason alone to discover the truth about the whole of life and the power of technology to alter social patterns and disturb cultural assumptions),[50] has been the main engine that has driven forward historical mutations on a breath-taking scale since the end of the 17th century.[51] Post-modernity has arisen as a theory translated into practice that the modern period has run its course. However, due to the nature of its analysis of the modern project's apparent failure to live up to its own dreams – in particular the criticism of any interpretative theory that claims a privileged explanation of all the data – it avoids language about the beginning of a new era.

Both modernity and post-modernity, as sets of social phenomena understood within particular theoretical frameworks, shape the contemporary world in both hidden and overt ways. By understanding their respective impacts on society as a whole, it is possible to appreciate why certain beliefs and values became accepted, tentatively at first, as a plausible explanation of changing experiences but later were embedded in the collective consciousness of society as self-evidently true. To use the analogy of crime detection, by comprehending the motives of the principal actors in a felony, the detective is able to unravel the plot. Investigations are intended not only to solve the main elements of a mystery but (as for example in the case of a serial rapist) help make the environment a safer place to live in. In a way, this research is about attempting to fulfil both these aims.

The case to be investigated

Within the sweep of several centuries of history, modernity as a distinct, self-conscious, rational process has seemingly turned out to be a *digression* from a promising, but rather quickly obstructed, intellectual tradition - namely the exploration of the implications of the symmetry of two complementary sources of truth, the *word* and *world* of God. Post-modernity, on the other hand, is proving apparently to be not so much an advance on the modern project as a *regression* to ideas which ostensibly exalt irrational thinking.[52] In the midst of a volatile and erratic cultural situation, due to the harmful consequences of both the digression and

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[49] *The Future of Reason, Science and Faith: Following Modernity and Post-modernity* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2007), pp. 9-26.

[50] The strength of particular beliefs (Weber) and the potency of productive forces (Marx) as instigators of change are both accepted in this account as necessary explanations of the phenomena.

[51] The period when modern science became established in the work of Isaac Newton and modern political discourse was initiated in the writings of Thomas Hobbes and John Locke.

[52] See, Susan Haack, *Manifesto of a Passionate Moderate: Unfashionable Essays* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), *passim*; Donald Wood, *Post-Intellectualism and the Decline of Democracy: The Failure of Reason and Responsibility in the Twentieth Century* Westport: Praeger Publishers, 1996), pp. 1-44.

regression, an unprecedented challenge faces current thinking to retake the threads of a promising beginning and develop them into a contemporary agenda for the renewal of thought and life. This study will seek to test the thesis that mainstream Christian belief, shorn of the temptation to convert itself into an institutional power-base, is the best contender to take on this task. It will endeavour to accomplish this formidable quest by assessing the relevant evidence for its claim to possess superior explanatory and re-creative powers in comparison with major alternatives.

The tools of investigation

In attempting to solve any crime, detectives will come across a number of clues which may begin to identify the perpetrator. Not all the clues give clear evidence. If the criminal is clever enough, he or she may well lay false trails. Often, the crime remains unresolved until a pivotal clue is uncovered. Similarly with an investigation of the causes of a serious assault on the promised dawning of a new era some three centuries ago there are many clues to hand. They are provided by the analytical powers of different disciplines, all of which are important. But the essential clue is still missing. The inability of opinion-formers today to stem the incoming tide of pessimism and apprehension is not easily explained by using the instruments of interpretation fashioned from within the modern project itself. Often, the assumptions on which they are based reflect the problem. They are prone to reject, as inadmissible, the very evidence needed to clear up the enigma of contemporary Western society. The process is equivalent to overlooking, through myopia or prejudice, the key piece of evidence that would resolve the case.

An enquiry, from a Christian perspective, into the significance of the data is not a guarantee of easy solutions; it does not propose a short-cut through difficult terrain nor offer a quick fix at the rub of a lamp. It does, however, provide a standpoint which does not exclude *ab initio* any explanation which looks like proving fruitful. More particularly, it offers a framework in which to test the conjecture that the harmonious correlation between the word and world of God is a necessary assumption for making sense of the deep intellectual, ethical and spiritual unease apparent today in cultures which reflect modernity. To demonstrate that this is the decisive key will require serious, critical investigation.

The abandoned tradition

In brief, the tradition which momentarily promised to come to fruition some 350 years ago suggested that the best hope for authentic human flourishing would come through harnessing the resources of two sources of truth: the word and the world of God. Human beings would understand their true destiny and would be able to enjoy it to the full only as they "read" and lived on the basis of the two "books": the Bible as the record of God's action within and interpretation of the whole of reality and the natural world as a source of human nourishment and pleasure. Neither "book" was self-contained as the source of all knowledge and wisdom. Both books had to be opened and read with the other present for cross-referencing. Each needed a

commitment of faith, or belief in a particular prior understanding of reality, for the process of reading to make sense[53].

The subversions of the tradition

Unfortunately, the tradition was swiftly sabotaged from within and distorted from without. Indeed, the existence of the tradition may be more theoretical than real, more of an ideal than anything that can be identified historically as having possessed a self-conscious existence.[54]

From within, the tradition was vandalised by a particularly devastating *will-to power*. At around the time of the birth of modern science, the gigantic conflict between the forces of the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation was still being played out. The "territorial tragedy"[55] of Christianity encountered its nadir in the Thirty Years' War, one of the last major attempts to maintain the coercive force and authoritarianism of the religious state over the non-violent compulsion of truth and the authority of conscience. In some instances, this absolutism was also mobilised against the incipient findings of scientific discovery. The enemies of the tradition failed to perceive the nature of genuine Christian freedom,[56] which, whilst stating that there is an inviolable form given to reality, nevertheless affirms the legitimacy of free investigation and freedom of belief.

From without, the tradition was deformed by the *will-to-independence*. The humanist impulse, begun in the Renaissance,[57] was about to embark on its 'rationalist' turn provoked by the intellectual project of Descartes.[58] Autonomous self-reference (the human mind alone as the measure and guarantee of assured knowledge) began its fateful march.

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[53] Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958) and others have argued that faith in the intelligibility of the world is a necessary basis for scientific investigation. In an analogical way, belief in a reliable source of knowing external to empirical data is a necessary basis to search for a fully human knowledge. In the case of science, the confirmation of sense perception and the discovered regularity of mechanisms in the world help to authenticate the 'faith' in the reliability of empirical investigation; in the case of biblical revelation, the ability to give, over the long-term, comprehensive answers to life's major dilemmas helps to authenticate faith in the word. However, as there are proper external criteria for testing truth-claims, the initial commitment of faith should not imply the circular reasoning which leads to 'fideism': c.f., the discussion between Harold Netland and Lesslie Newbigin in P.Sampson, V.Samuel and C.Sugden (eds.), *Faith and Modernity* (Oxford: Regnum Books, 1994), pp. 85-87,106-111.

[54] However, c.f., W. Mark Richardson and Wesley J. Wildman, *Religion and Science* (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 8-12; Stanley Jacki, *The Origin of Science and the Science of its Origin* (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1978), pp. 1-21, and the discussion of the origins of modern science in chapter 2.

[55] Namely the identification of one political region with one form of Christianity to the exclusion of others. C.f., Thomas Munck, *Seventeenth Century Europe: State, Conflict and Social Order in Europe 1598-1700* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1990), pp. 277ff.

[56] See, J. Andrew Kirk, *The Meaning of Freedom: A Study of Secular, Muslim and Christian Views*, (Carlisle: Peternoster Press, 1998), chapter 3.

[57] See, David Cooper, *World Philosophies: An Historical Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell 1996), pp. 228-231.

[58] See, chapter 3 of *The Future of Reason*.

The consequences of subversion - modernity

It was by no means inevitable that the "reading of the world" (the scientific enterprise) should have been conducted independently of, even less in opposition to, the "reading of the word". There are some signs that the destruction caused by the divorce of the two is now being recognised as the result of an unnecessary polemic. For example, the assumptions, methods and conclusions of science raise theological and ethical questions that only sources of knowledge beyond those that science itself supplies can answer satisfactorily, and theology and science share some of the same basic principles of rational enquiry.[59] It seems almost trite to claim today that "if God is the source of all truth, there should be a consonance between the right conclusions of human scholarship and theological conclusions based on revelation."[60] And yet the 'conditional' of this sentence is precisely what has been, and continues to be, the most basic matter of dispute in Western thought since the 17th century.

However, we can only deal with history as it unfolded. The modern project, it is generally recognised, can be traced to the attempt to ground the attainment of indubitable knowledge on irrefutable grounds.[61] To avoid the acids of scepticism and the destabilising effect brought about by radical uncertainty, influential thinkers believed that the process of reasoning needs to be self-validating without having to appeal to authority or depend on faith. It has to be able to generate from itself a set of necessary, self-evident principles which no-one could doubt without being self-refuting:

"In Descartes' system, reason first clears away all preconceptions and then elaborates its own first principles, accepting only clear and distinct conceptions which can survive the most rigorous examination … For the system to work, the universe must be modelled on a deductive system, so that what happens in it must be deducible from the laws of its operation and its initial state".[62]

This desire to build, from utterly secure foundations, an incontrovertible body of knowledge about the world which humans inhabit had an emancipatory intent. It was believed that humans had it within their grasp to liberate themselves from all disputable, uncertain and arbitrary beliefs that intrinsically could not validate themselves, in order to build knowledge afresh from non-controversial, universally acceptable, initial postulates. Humanity would come to self-realisation in the struggle "to separate truth from falsehood, reason from unreason, fact from fiction".[63]

As well as deductive reasoning from incontrovertible axioms, the inductive proceedings of the scientific method, based on meticulous observation and well-tested hypotheses, seemed to guarantee the fulfilment of the aspiration for incontestable knowledge, of a different order from mere opinion or belief. It had the twin merits of being rationally accessible to anyone who grasped its methods of operating

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[59] These claims will be explored as part of the concluding discussion in Part IV.

[60] Philip Clayton, *God and Contemporary Science* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997), p. 77.

[61] See, David West, *An Introduction to Continental Philosophy*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996) pp. 10-13.

[62] Keith Ward, 'The Decline and Fall of Reason' in Ursula King (ed.), *Faith and Practice in a Postmodern Age* (London: Cassell, 1998), pp. 22-23, 20.

[63] Christopher Norris, *Reclaiming Truth: Contribution to a Critique of Cultural Relativism* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1996), p. 141.

and universal in character, i.e., not contingent on factors (such as culture, situation, personality, and upbringing) which could relativise perspectives. Science, it is claimed, more than any other force within history, has the ability to make all equal, since it obeys a logic and set of rules that no-one can control but only submit to.

This approach to knowledge - from a firm foundation building upwards - and the cumulative discoveries provoked by the scientific method suggested an evolutionary, progressive or dialectical dimension to human history.[64] Progress seemed to be the inevitable accompaniment of a rational analysis of human problems in which the causes of the defects of human life could be objectively examined and put right in an ascending progression towards human perfection.[65] It is not surprising that dreams of the future dominated the imagination, the dream of a society of social equality and harmony, free from oppression, ignorance and bigotry. Such was the stuff of the utopias proclaimed by the Marquise de Condorcet[66], Saint-Simon,[67] Fourier, Owen and others.[68]

By contrast, the past was a dark age to be overcome, a vale of intellectual obscurity, primitive emotional drives and unproductive labour. Religion and faith belonged to this stage of human society, superstitious and pre-critical. Indeed, "religion, faith and rationality present themselves as three successive layers in a historical process, as human instruments that gradually unfold and become distinct".[69] The egg turns into a caterpillar and the latter into a chrysalis from which the butterfly gradually emerges and flies away free, discarding the earlier stages of its life. The development was irreversible; there was no turning back. As a matter of temporal sequence, rationality simply superseded faith.

The whole process has been well-documented. There have been many twists in the tail (tale) of the story, which have been described and analysed at length. Now, however, modernity is sorely wounded, though, in the immortal words of Mark Twain (applied to himself), notice of its death is greatly exaggerated. In many ways it is bankrupt, but it is not obvious that it has yet been superseded. At the risk of over-simplification, the fundamental problem appears to be, not the use of reason itself as an instrument of awakening and edification, but the entrusting to reason a weight of expectation it cannot bear. Reason became isolated from all the other aspects of

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[64] The orderly progression of science from conjecture to hypothesis to the testing of evidence to confirmation or revision has been disputed by Thomas Kuhn in his elaboration of 'paradigm shifts', c.f., *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), pp. 92-110. However, some commentators believe that Kuhn's theory has confused too readily the distinction between the context of discovery and the context of justification, c.f., Martin Curd and J.A.Cover, *Philosophy of Science: The Central Issues* (New York: W.W.Norton, 1998), pp. 230-245; Christopher Norris, *Against Relativism: Philosophy of Science, Deconstruction and Critical Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), pp. 82-96. Kuhn's historical approach to scientific discovery will be explored later in this study (c.f., chapters 4 and 5).

[65] See, J. D. Hunter, 'What is Modernity? Historical Roots and Contemporary Features' in *Faith and Modernity*, p. 21.

[66] 'Sketch for an Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind', cf., Lawrence Cahoone (ed.), *From Modernism to Postmodernism: An Anthology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), pp. 72-82.

[67] K. Taylor (ed.), *Saint-Simon: Selected Writings on Science, Industry and Social Organization* (London: Croom Hill, 1975).

[68] See, K. Taylor, *The Political Ideas of the Utopian Socialists* (London: Cass, 1982).

[69] Bert Hoedemaker, *Secularisation and Mission* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 1997), p. 18.

human life. Paradoxically, the theory about its ability to perform universal functions could not be tested by the light of reason alone. Once the 'book of the word' was shut tight and allowed to gather dust in the basement of history, the 'book of the world' became ever more mystifying. Principles like justice, mercy and forgiveness do not present themselves as self-evident truths to the rational mind.[70] The very existence of the world and its order, and the ability of rational minds to understand reality, are not self-explanatory, they need explicating by recourse to a theory which is held prior to empirical investigation.[71]

From being an instrument which could help define means within a context in which the ends were discerned by other principles, reason became the sole actor in the field. It became an autonomous power which carried other potentially oppressive powers within its bosom - capitalism, colonialism, technology and state bureaucracy - , but without sufficient power of discernment to see the inherent dangers:

> "The idea that the free market is self-stabilising is an archaic, curious relic of Enlightenment rationalism."[72]

By pretending to be the measure of the knowable, reason became reductionist. Having presumed that the chief end of human existence was accessible to reason and having discovered its limitations in practice, there developed an increasing divorce between the objective world created by technological rationality and the subjective world of meaning and purpose.[73] The person is simply reduced to choosing between objects in the outside world put there by the harnessing of instrumental reason to the domination of the book of nature. But pure choice, when there is no ultimate reason for choosing, because the meaning of existence is unknowable through reason alone, is degrading; it shrinks the complexity of the full potential of humanness.[74]

Modernity – not so much progress as diversion

Paradoxically, the modern project, in trying to secure an unshakeable hold on reality by eliminating what has been considered *mere* belief, has lost the most powerful reason for believing there is such a thing as reality, namely the divine warrant. Reliance upon the imminent powers of reason alone has inevitably given rise to an intellectually irrefutable scepticism.[75] The main problem resides with the strong foundationalist claim that there are self-validating criteria for distinguishing between genuine knowledge and mere opinion in all cases. The sceptic disputes the claim that we have a reliable basis for confidence in our ability to conceptualise the world as it is.[76] Richard Rorty traces scepticism to the 'representational' conception of belief and

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[70] See, Lamin Sanneh, *Religion and the Variety of Culture* (Valley Forge: Trinity Press International, 1996), p. 60.

[71] Diogenes Allen, *Christian Belief in a Postmodern World: The Full Weight of Belief* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989), pp. 3-4.

[72] John Gray, *False Dawn: The Delusions of Global Capitalism* (London: Granta, 1998), p. 198.

[73] Alain Touraine, *Critique of Modernity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), p. 5.

[74] See, G. M. Tamas, 'A Clarity Interfered With' in T. Burns (ed.), *After History? Francis Fukuyama and His Critics* (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 1994), pp. 86-87.

[75] Scepticism is the conviction that "all so-called knowledge is groundless belief", c.f., Michael Williams, 'Scepticism' in John Greco and Ernest Sosa, *The Blackwell Guide to Epistemology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), p. 41. The proper place of belief in reasoning about reality will be explored more fully in Part IV of the book.

[76] See, Crispin Wright, *Realism, Meaning and Truth* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), p. 2.

its close ally the correspondence theory of truth; in other words, the very assumptions on which a firmly realist view of the objective world is based.[77]

Even if a radical, philosophical scepticism is not justified, it has to be admitted (according to the nature of reasoning) that belief is an indispensable component of rational endeavour. The theory links belief and rational critical method together in an unbreakable chain: knowledge is impossible without prior belief; belief can only assume the status of knowledge if there is sufficient propositional evidence for it. In other words, knowledge is not possible without the acceptance of some fundamental assumption(s); belief is not warranted unless supported by good evidence.[78] Consequently, it is a major conceptual mistake to suggest a necessary dichotomy between belief and reason. Donald Wood commits this fallacy in a stark, yet all too common, form:

> "By definition, *faith* is belief which cannot be verified by *reason.* Faith is the blind acceptance of an idea or doctrine without any rational evidence or tangible proof. Faith is non-intellectual." [79]

Modernity appears to be a classical case of disposing the baby with the bath water!

Reliance on reason alone (rationalism) has led inexorably and paradoxically to an unnecessary lack of confidence in the place of reason in understanding the world (rationality), and consequently to various experiments with irrational postulates as ways of negotiating the world. According to the theory we wish to test, the rejection of confidence in the truth of the word leads, *pari passu*, to a loss of confidence in the truth of the world. Driving a wedge between the two has created a number of false dichotomies, which have led to an immensely significant, 300 year, digression of Western consciousness. Holding together the two sources of knowledge allows for an effective way of being able to distinguish between proper belief and irrational superstition, between justified true belief and a knowledge that is supposedly immune from error (infallible), refutation (incorrigible) and doubt (indubitable). Being constrained by the truth of the word and the world eliminates an unstable human autonomy that tends towards incoherence, but without, however, having to compromise a genuine freedom.

The tendency to split apart what should remain together has led to an unfortunate and unnecessary demand that a belief in foundational assumptions must be able to answer the 'infinite regress' dilemma.[80] In other words, it is claimed that those who wish to argue for a foundationalist approach to knowledge are obliged to defend the

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[77] See, J. Dancy and E. Sosa, *A Companion to Epistemology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), p. 89. It will be necessary to meet the sceptical challenge later. Suffice it to say here that the position appears to be self-referentially inconsistent, in that it cannot justify its own demands, and ultimately irrelevant, in that in making ordinary judgements we have to suspend scepticism; see, Stephen Nathason, *The Ideal of Rationality: A Defense within Reason* (Chicago: Open court Press, 1994), pp. 209-211. The common-sense view is put colloquially by Dostoyevsky: "A hundred rabbits don't make a horse and a hundred suspicions don't make one single proof .. that's just common sense" *Crime and Punishment* (London: Penguin Books, 1951), p. 463.

[78] See, *A Companion to Epistemology*, op. cit., p. 437.

[79] *Post-Intellectualism*, op. cit., p. 250.

[80] The dilemma that there seems to be no end to the chain of necessary justifications: "each step in the chain (of the search for ultimacy) demands a further explanation, and if it is not forthcoming, everything that depends on that step is 'ungrounded'," Roger Scruton, *Modern Philosophy: An Introduction and Survey* (London: Mandarin, 1994), p. 4.

strong version. The critics seem to assume that, if the acquisition of significant knowledge cannot pass the three-fold test of freedom from error, refutation and doubt, then foundationalism must be abandoned altogether. This demand for the strong version or no version at all is fortunately not self-explicating; fortunate, because all alternatives to some kind of foundationalism as a theory in epistemology (holism, coherentism, pragmatism or behaviourism) end up with more problems than they solve.[81]

Without denying the importance of the role that coherence plays in the justification of true beliefs, the possibility of gaining access to knowledge demands a *moderate* foundationalism if it is to escape from an unresolvable relativism. To have knowledge one must *assume* a source of direct knowledge or directly justified belief and that any other knowledge or justified belief is traceable to this source. The difference between the strong and moderate forms of foundationalism lies in the requirements: the former has to be incorrigible, the latter is defeasible (i.e. open to correction).[82]

There seems no reason to dispute *a priori* the possibility that the Christian view of divine revelation - God's personal and rational communication of truth to human beings (the word of God) - can act as a foundation in this moderate sense. Likewise, the empirical discovery of the natural world forms a foundation on which trust in the reliability of certain mechanisms can be built.[83]

The question for Christian faith that arises from this discussion, and to which we will return in the last section of this chapter, and more fully in Part IV, concerns the relationship between the task of making sense of and living in the world as we experience it and the foundational assumption that only in the revelation of the personal God is knowledge, and its conditions, properly established, vindicated and completed. This is a matter which encompasses the 'plausibility of beliefs' in a given culture, questions about right and wrong living (e.g. peace, justice and the integrity of the environment[84]) and the truth, or otherwise, of 'other gospels' (both religious and secular). Before we turn to this debate, we need to explore the other current alternative to modernity, namely post-modernity.

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[81] Thus, for example, the coherentist version of epistemic justification, namely that "knowledge … is true belief that coheres with the background belief system and corrected versions of that system" (*A Companion to Epistemology*, op cit., p. 69) is implausible as a wholly adequate account. Laurence BonJour finds three reasons why it is inadequate: it entails that epistemic justification requires an input from or contact with the world outside the system of beliefs; many alternative systems of belief can be invented, each of them entirely coherent, there is no clear connection between the coherence of a system of beliefs and the cognitive goal of truth, 'Foundationalism and Coherentism' in *The Blackwell Guide to Epistemology*, op. cit., p. 122.

[82] This position is argued for persuasively by Robert Audi, *Epistemology: A Contemporary Introduction to the Theory of Knowledge* (London: Routledge, 1998), pp. 204-207. Precisely because knowledge is justified true belief about a proposition or state of affairs, it is open to being challenged as unwarranted and mistaken.

[83] BonJour argues that "the basis for the needed inference between sensory appearance and objective fact is to be found in … first their involuntary, spontaneous character and second, the fact that they fit together and reinforce each other", op.cit., p. 138. (This epistemological observation combines foundationalism and coherentism).

[84] See, J. Andrew Kirk, *What is Mission? Theological Explorations* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1999), chapters 6, 8 and 9.

Post-modernity – not so much advance as regression

The cultural phenomenon generically referred to as postmodernity manifests itself in a variety of ways, through architecture, art, philosophy, cultural theory, lifestyles, the media and politics.[85] The name suggests that it is a way of viewing the world which comes after modernity, with the inference that it is, at least, reinterpreting, if not seeking to replace the traditions which have flowed from the Enlightenment. Its significance is hotly disputed. Some see it as having signalled quite clearly and forcefully the demise of the modern project, others see it as in essential continuity with modernity (a kind of late, or self-reflexive modernity[86]), yet others view it sceptically as a clichéd reaction to a decaying movement that still clings on to the last vestiges of a faded intellectual legitimacy. Whatever the interpretation, and we will discuss the post-modern condition at much greater length later, it manifests many beliefs that appear to be largely untouched by the cultural and intellectual impact of the Christian message on Western history.[87]

Post-modernity can best be described as a complex cultural and social movement which is premised on a thoroughgoing critique of the normal assumptions associated with the Enlightenment:

> "Typical of postmodernism is its scepticism concerning the central role assigned to reason and rational thought. Over against indubitable truth-claims, an overconfident faith in science, and a metaphysical way of reasoning, the interrelatedness of truth-perspectives, ethical pluralism, and cultural relativism is typical of the postmodern perspective."[88]

It is commonly associated with the phrase, 'the end of metanarratives'.[89] By this is meant the impossibility of finding one over-arching interpretation which does justice to the whole of reality. Rather, the history of humankind is judged to be a discontinuous succession of fairly random events without any transcendent meaning or purpose. For post-modernity there is no *alpha* and *omega* to the human story; indeed, there is no one story, only fragments of many stories (or, perhaps, fables).

In one sense, this affirmation is less a description of what is perceived by the post-modern apologists to be the case as a judgement of what ought to be the case. It is not so much an empirical observation as an ethical demand. Modernity is interpreted as an ideology in the sense that the assumptions on which it is based simply mask the play of power. Its view of rationality, progress and the 'end' of history is little more than a legitimisation of a set of relationships in which certain sectors of society and certain nations of the world maintain their dominance and privileges:

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[85] See, Stuart Sim, (ed.), *The Icon Dictionary of Postmodern Thought* (Cambridge: Icon Books, 1998); Hans Bertens, *The Idea of the Postmodern: A History* (London: Routledge, 1995).

[86] See, Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991).

[87] Unlike modernity, postmodernity in general explicitly ignores the cultural and intellectual impact of Christianity on the West. If it is touched by this tradition at all, it is only indirectly by being part of a historical process affected subconsciously by the Christian worldview and moral teaching.

[88] J.Wentzel van Huyssteen, *Essays in Postfoundational Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), p. 187.

[89] Richard Kearney, *Modern Movements in European Philosophy* (Manchester: Manchester Univ. Press, 1994), pp. 123-127; also called "master" narratives because of their supposed tendency to dominate and oppress, and to represent an exclusively masculine view of reality.

> "Knowledge is always the relative and questionable expression of a particular constellation of relations of power and force. The symbiotic relationship between knowledge and power is ....at the heart of Foucault's account of the parallel emergence in modern societies of the human sciences as 'disciplines' with scientific pretensions and what he calls 'disciplinary power'".[90]

The great attraction of post-modernity probably lies in its uncompromising exposure of the pretensions of the modern discourse, and in particular the claims sometimes made on behalf of science that it has the power to deliver an increasingly problem-free world. The post-modern sensibility appears to be a new force which defends the legitimate aspirations of 'the other', namely those who are 'different' from me, giving them back the right to shape their beliefs and lives in accordance with their own subjectivity and not another's interpretation of what is right or wrong for them. It allows for a heterodoxy which challenges the orthodoxy of a late capitalist, globalised system, which manifestly coerces and oppresses vast segments of humanity. It calls in question what is taken for granted. It is iconoclastic, irreverent, counter-cultural. It appears to be radically tolerant of difference, incoherence and permissiveness, critical of seriousness and passionately committed to play. It is highly compatible with a post-revolutionary, post-ideological, pluralist age. It catches and challenges admirably the *zeitgeist* of modernity with its passionless rationalism and unremitting tedium.

Yet, for all its potentially beneficial analysis of contemporary social and cultural forms, overall it represents a regression to an unattractive past. To begin with, in so far as it is largely a reaction against something else, it is not likely to be particularly visionary. It knows what it does not like, but is confused about alternatives. In this sense it follows other reactions to the Enlightenment project - Romanticism and Existentialism being, perhaps, the most significant. The Romantics "placed the determinate effects of unconscious passion at the centre of human subjectivity."[91] They vigorously disputed the Enlightenment notion of progress and returned to a reevaluation of the primitive (Herder) or original innocence (Rousseau): the so-called 'savage' who loves his family and his tribe is a "truer being than that shadow of a man, the refined citizen of the world."[92] They criticised the exalted view of rationality as the supreme quality of human life, emphasised feelings as at least an equal source of knowledge to reason and, in anticipation of the contemporary 'linguistic turn', emphasised the subjective powers of language.[93]

Existentialism can be identified as a kind of Constructivism, the view that "humanity has now reached a point of self-conscious development at which it must construct its own values, and not expect them to be delivered by some higher authority".[94] The higher authority now being rejected was no longer that of religion but of reason. Neither God nor universal reason predetermine what we shall be - existence precedes

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[90] *An Introduction to Continental Philosophy*, op. cit., p. 171.

[91] Anthony Elliott, 'Psychoanalysis and Social Theory' in Bryan S. Turner, *The Blackwell Companion to Social Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), p. 172.

[92] Quoted in *World Philosophies*, p. 281.

[93] "Here, perhaps, are the earliest intimations, in the West at least, of that 'linguistic relativism' which was to become an important tendency in twentieth-century philosophy", *World Philosophies*, p. 283; see, Maurice Cranston, *The Romantic Movement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 21ff.

[94] Bernard Williams, 'Ethics' in A. C. Grayling, *Philosophy*, p. 555.

essence -; therefore, human beings are free from any possible 'given' to create their own reality and values. This, says Sartre, places on the individual an enormous responsibility, for he or she has to choose which chief ends to pursue; not anyone nor anything – God, tradition, reason, nature - gives answers. The individual is 'condemned' to make his or her own world and face fully the consequences of his or her own creation. Every attempt to hide behind the decisions or responsibilities of others, pretending that we are forced to play certain roles, is 'self-deception' and 'bad faith'.[95]

Post-modernity shares these historically preceding movements' emphasis on the priority of the primordial,[96] inter-subjective, attitudinal or prescriptivist account of ethical knowledge, which claims that values are not given as universal, categorical imperatives but represent the desire or decision of the individual will. They arise, as it were, from below, not from above (given by Reason, Revelation or Nature). Practical reason cannot bring us to a consensus which all intelligent, well-educated persons would be bound to accept if they were able to rise above partisanship and prejudice. Post-modernity denies all pretensions to the intrinsically given because of its "sceptical mistrust of all truth-claims, normative standards or efforts to distinguish vertical knowledge from current and contingent 'good in the way of belief'". It marks an epochal shift "from the regime of truth to the absence of all validity-conditions".[97]

The result is a radically relativistic approach to knowledge and decision-making, clearly exemplified in the pragmatics of Richard Rorty. In one particularly robust article, he outlines with brutal clarity the stark achievements of post-modern (post)philosophy:

> "Recent philosophy helps us to see practices and ideas ... as neither natural nor inevitable - but that is all it does. When philosophy has finished showing that everything is a social construct, it does not help us to decide which social constructs to retain or replace".[98]

He continues by recognising the almost impossible dilemma that post-modernity has posed for the feminist movement. Feminism is based on the distinction made in all ideological critique since Marx between reality and false consciousness and on the notions of distortion and dissimulation practiced by the ruling classes seeking to legitimise their interests. However, ideas like 'false' and 'distortion' presuppose a representational view of an objective reality that is in clear conflict with the pragmatist and deconstructionist argument that everything is a matter of social construct. If it is impossible to talk of 'distorted communication' or 'distorting ideas' without believing in objects external to discourses, capable of being accurately or inaccurately represented by these discourses, then "there is no point trying to

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[95] See, Calvin Pinchin, *Issues in Philosophy* (Basingstoke: MacMillan, 1990), pp. 289-301; *Modern Movements*, pp. 67-68.

[96] Post-modern poetry is "marked by an acceptance of the primordial, or spiritual and sexual necessity, of myth, the latest understandings of science, chance and change, wit and dream", Donald Allen and George Butterick, *The Postmoderns: The New American Poetry Revisited* (New York: Grove Press, 1982), p. 11, quoted in *The Idea of the Postmodern*, op. cit., p. 51.

[97] *Reclaiming Truth*, pp. 182, 183.

[98] 'Femininism, Ideology and Deconstruction: A Pragmatist View' in Slavej Zizek (ed.), *Mapping Ideology* (London: Verso, 1994), p. 227.

distinguish between 'natural' and merely 'cultural'; no point in appealing to 'way things really are'".[99] The outcome of Rorty's position is Nietzschean in tone and consequences:

> "Neither pragmatists nor deconstructionists can do more for feminism than help rebut attempts to ground these practices (namely patriarchal) on something deeper than contingent historical fact - the physical strength of men over against women. *All that is left for women is to grab power when they can*".[100]

Here we can see the inevitable outcome of the dogma of 'the end of meta-narratives'.[101] It seems as if the solution to the seriously ill patient is to prescribe a deadly poison. Rather than diagnosing the true symptoms and applying an appropriate medicine, post-modernity's answer is euthanasia! If recent history can be likened to a sea voyage, post-modernity represents mutiny - the determination to wrest the steering mechanism from the self-appointed ('enlightened') owners of the ship. Once having 'deconstructed' (the authority of) the captain and won over the crew, the mutineers go on a pleasure trip which may take them anywhere or nowhere - there is no map, no compass and the natural fixed-points of sun, stars, wind and currents are unreliable. No matter! The idea of destination, or of home-coming, is an absurd illusion. Like the porpoises and whales (probably more intelligent than humans) the boat's passengers can give themselves up to endless play. When the engine runs out of fuel, we can sink the ship and take to the life-boats. Each group of passengers can then decide for itself which destination it wishes to take, none are right and none are wrong.[102]

Getting back on track

Speaking inevitably in general terms, modernity has been characterised by the attempt to build a universally valid explanation of existence, an intellectually satisfying theory that encompasses everything, from the basis of human reason alone. It proposes a verifiable view of reality which is not historically contingent, culturally loaded or socially prejudiced, but acceptable to every right-minded thinker. It is a grand scheme to bring unity to human discourse and community out of the conflict of sectarian interpretations. It aspires to adhere to W.K. Clifford's famous aphorism: "it is wrong

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[99] *Mapping Ideology*, pp. 229-230.

[100] *Mapping Ideology*, pp. 233-234 (italics mine).

[101] Every bit as much a dogma as Fukuyama's 'end of history' thesis, *The End of History and the Last Man* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1992). Thus, for example, "Lyotards's conception of justice conforms to the general experimental anti-representationalism of the postmodern condition, except, of course, in the absolutist ban on the elimination of rival players from a game. Although this meta-rule involves him in contradiction - it is clearly not subject to experimentation - it is also clearly necessary for the inability of his experimental/political model", *The Idea of the Postmodern*, p. 129.

[102] "In post-modern writing there is very little that allows any direct application to existential situations except as ironic stances for negotiating a world so full of signifiers it must be empty of beliefs", Charles Altieri, 'Postmodernism: a question of definition', *Par Rapport*, 2,2, 1979, p. 98. "Post-modernism means cutting ourselves adrift from solid and stable, boundary markers of what is right and wrong, good and bad, correct and incorrect, true and false, real and illusory and sailing off into the unknown without benefit of map or compass, H. Gene Blocker, 'An Explanation of Post-Modernism' in Alburey Castell, Donald Borchert and Arthur Zucker (eds.), *An Introduction to Modern Philosophy: Examining the Human Condition* (New York: Macmillan College Publishing House, 1994), p. 678.

always, everywhere and for everyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence",[103] where evidence means experimental data that is intrinsically open to being falsified.

Post-modernity, on the other hand, is characterised by its 'absolute' conviction that any attempt to build a uniform body of knowledge is not only doomed to failure for good epistemic reasons but actually hides a sinister design to impose upon all peoples only one right way of looking upon the world. The outcome of the modern project is exclusion of difference, uniformity, monotony and vapidity. It reduces a richly textured, multi-form world into a grey, drab, monotonous tedium. Modernity means control; post-modernity advocates the breaking of all bounds, experimentation, rebellion against the 'experts', diversity, acceptance of divergence and incongruity, the celebration of eccentricity.

However, as attempts to encompass a meaningful approach to life (and post-modernity is no less a 'meta-narrative' than its rival) both are fatally flawed: reliance upon a unifying, ultimately unambiguous rationality leads eventually to a scepticism it cannot answer on its own terms, whilst the dismissal of rational criteria for judging the veracity of beliefs is self-defeating and leads to indifference and relativism. There does not seem to be any way out of this impasse, unless an epistemology can be discovered (or rediscovered) that can allow for and give an account of both unity and diversity in the knowledge and explanation of the whole of life. It should be an epistemology that is able to critique ideologies, sustain an unpretentious science, recognise truth and admit error, reunite a fragmented world whilst allowing for creative diversity. It should be realist, fully rational, consistent, non-relativist and non-sceptical whilst being fallibilist. If such an epistemology (perhaps wisdom would be a more adequate concept) is unavailable, contemporary Western society would appear to be condemned to perpetual confusion about the most basic propositions concerning human life.

Assuming that the conflict between modern and post-modern ways of assessing life best describes the cultural condition of the West in the 21st century, and that both have exhausted their resources in trying to explain and re-create contemporary society in a way conducive to real human thriving, the hypothesis of this study is that the only fully sustainable epistemology is one that allows mutual respect for and the interplay of knowledge through the 'world' and through the 'word'. It means a thorough re-examination of these two sources of knowledge in such a way as to eliminate an unnecessary and false rivalry and to avoid the Scylla of scepticism and the Charybdis of relativism. The hypothesis has to be able to do justice to both the ordinary and specialist use of language[104] and has to be consistently workable in practice. Quite probably the most potentially fruitful place to explore the hypothesis is in the field of ethics, moral philosophy or practical reason. The French philosopher, Levinas, has in recent times strongly advocated ethical discourse as the real *locus* for epistemology.[105] Seeking for knowledge either through a disembodied

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[103] *Lectures and Essays* (London: Macmillan, 1879), p. 185.

[104] Discussion of a number of crucial issues in philosophical thought about language will be dealt with in chapter 6, 'The Turn to Language.'

[105] See, Zygmund Bauman, *Postmodernity and its Discontents* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1997), pp. 46-52.

ontology or an objectifying epistemology, whilst ignoring the absolute claim of the 'other', will always lead to a stultifying reductionism of epistemological possibilities.[106] Others have also either hinted at or developed the rewarding epistemological possibilities inherent in ethics. Thus John Bowker argues that to know is not dependent so much on the certainty that one thinks as on the observation that, without exception, human beings make ethical judgements, i.e. valuations of what is right and wrong behaviour, or what one is responsible to do and avoid doing.[107] Stephen Nathason explores the deep relationship between criteria of rationality, the examined life and what are intrinsically *good* ends.[108] Linda Zagzebski believes that the normative side of epistemology is crucial to a satisfactory answer to its fundamental questions:

> "My purpose in writing this book is to draw more attention to the side of epistemology that overlaps with ethics and, in particular, to show how one form of ethical theory - a pure virtue theory - can be developed in ways that are rich enough to permit the kinds of evaluations of epistemic states that are crucial for epistemology."[109]

It is well known that Alasdair MacIntyre develops epistemological themes out of attention to 'the good' and, in a sense, tests his theory about traditions in the ethical, political debate about the common good.[110]

An ethical approach to epistemology seeks to discern what is justified true belief in relation to action. It brings theoretical discussions about both the possibility of knowing and the adequacy of beliefs into the arena of every day living. The issues raised cannot, then, be ignored as belonging only to the concerns of professional academics. They touch the lived experience of the 'average person-in-the-street.' Important for this account of knowledge is the consistency between intellectually defined belief and the moral decisions of daily life. The fundamental question is not how do I justify my beliefs or know that I can rely on my perceptions or memory or the witness of others, but how do I justify my actions. To know *what* is right to do is more important than either knowing *how* the world works or *which* beliefs seem the most valid to hold.

Empirical knowledge and faith assumptions are crucial to ethical judgement, but can be most clearly seen as a way of substantiating the way we conduct ourselves. Thus, for example, if I wish to examine the reasons for and against a married couple being divorced, I need to know what the best empirical research says about the effects on children of divorce, or of an unresolved conflictual relationship, and I need to have a well-grounded view of marriage and the family. I may look at alternative beliefs to the traditional ones about male-female bonding. I may assess how much changing

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[106] See, An *Introduction to Continental Philosophy*, p. 163.

[107] *Is God a Virus? Genes, Culture and Religion* (London: SPCK, 1995), pp. 110-113.

[108] See, *The Idea of Rationality*, op. cit., pp. 224-229.

[109] *Virtues of the Mind: An Inquiry into the Nature of Virtue and the Ethical Foundations of Knowledge*, (Cambridge: CUP, 1996), p. 336.

[110] See, 'Moral Relativism, Truth and Justification' and 'Politics, Philosophy and the Common Good' in Kelvin Knight (ed.), *The MacIntyre Reader* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998), pp. 202ff., 235ff.

cultural styles affect decision-making. But in the long run the important issue is: what should be done?

Philosophical systems, religious beliefs and ethical stances are of no ultimate value unless they can be lived consistently. Living consistently raises then the question of what is right and what is true, and these questions in turn raise the ultimate issues of primary assumptions. It is through daily ethical dilemmas, I believe, that we come to realise that neither modernity nor post-modernity has the resources to provide satisfying answers. They are both ship-wrecked on the rocks of the 'deontological fallacy' – namely, that one can know what ought to be the case from knowing what is the case –, for neither reason, empirical research, social consensus nor personal judgement by themselves can ground moral judgements. They may help in deciding what means should be used to achieve certain ends, but the choice of moral ends depends on what moral values or virtues one believes in and these depend in turn on having reliable access to the answers to fundamental questions about the purpose, meaning and worth of life.[111]

Given the fact that we are all live a moral life and all make moral judgements, another way of getting a handle on the epistemological question is by analysing the cogency of different ethical theories in establishing ethical decision-making. The main alternatives in contention within the modern period have been *ethical intuitionism, (Kantian) rationalism, utilitarian empiricism* and *non-cognitivism (expressivism).*[112] Each of these is an attempt to give both an account of moral notions and reasons for acting in particular ways. However, given an explicit rejection of the idea that goodness and truth are given realities within the human horizon, each of these positions builds its theory from an assumption of human autonomy and from within human experience rationally or empirically mediated. Methodologically, they succeed in giving reasons why it might be right or wrong to engage in some actions but they still beg the question about the content of the good or the virtuous.

Thus, we have, in the need to find an adequate epistemological rationale for ethical decision-making, a (the?) major intellectual and practical challenge for Western society in general and the Christian community in particular. Although the latter should be conscious in theory and practice of its minority position within a belligerent but brittle culture in the West, it has a responsibility to propose (but not impose) an epistemology in which truth claims are substantiated by their ability to ground a coherent ethics.

One of the tasks of such an epistemology would be to evaluate the traditions of modernity and post-modernity in order to incorporate into contemporary ethical discourse that which is of proven value whilst rejecting the unfounded claims. In this sense, the Christian community has, as one of its undertakings, a continuing dialogical and prophetic assignment with respect to the formative theories that drive current

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[111] These are controversial statements, set out here by way of a preview. They will be argued for later in this study.

[112] See, Robert Audi, *Epistemology*, pp. 264-267; Robert Audi, 'Moral Knowledge and Ethical Pluralism' in the *Blackwell Guide*, pp. 271-278.

perceptions of the good in the West.[113] Christians cannot afford to be plausibly accused of trying to revert to a pre-modern world, by ignoring or undervaluing the massive changes of thought, belief and lifestyle of the last 300 years.

If the main reflective enterprise for the Church in the West is to retake the promise of the fruitful alliance of word and world, it has to be done within the changed circumstances that acknowledge that we live (chronologically at least) *after* modernity and post-modernity. Thus, for example, if the "reading" of the word implies a coherent theory of revelation,[114] this will be re-examined in the light of the hypothesis that it is not a concept unique to monotheistic faiths, but is present, in different forms, in both modernity (nature "speaks") and post-modernity (art and language "give meaning"). In other words, 'revelation' is an indispensable necessity for the avoidance of ontological and ethical nihilism, it is a foundationalist assumption that permits the construction of a coherent life, not least by substantiating arguments in favour of freedom and tolerance[115]. Its inescapability is demonstrated in practice by the observation that, even when classical forms of revelation are abandoned as un-sustainable, new varieties are invented.

It is crucial for the Christian community to realise that it lives *after* modernity and post-modernity in another sense, namely that its 'cultural dialogue and evangelism' are undertaken in a world in which it no longer can expect privileges. The alliance of throne and altar is irrevocably (and rightly) broken in the Western world, even though there are attempts by some people in all religions to sustain it, or even revive it. The Christian community finds itself in a world much closer to that of the first century, with one imperium (global capitalism) [116] and a plethora of beliefs. Like the early Christian community in the Mediterranean basin, in political and cultural terms it is inconsequential.

Nevertheless, also like the first generation, Christians today are called to surpass their generation in intellectual endeavour and integrity. They are to emulate the practise of their forebears, described by one historian in the following terms:

> "The Christian read the best books, assimilated them, and lived the freest intellectual life the world had. Jesus had set them to be true to fact…Who did the thinking in that ancient world? Again and again it was the Christian. He out-thought the world."[117]

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[113] A recent historical analysis and current discussion of these from a 'classical' humanist perspective is contained in A. C. Grayling, *What is Good?* The author lays down a considerable challenge to what he calls transcendental (religious) views. It is precisely this challenge that has to be taken up and answered, if the thesis of this study is to be vindicated.

[114] As, for example, Nicholas Wolterstorff's comprehensive advocacy of the God who speaks, cf., *Divine Discourse: Philosophical Reflections on the claim that God speaks* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); also Roger Trigg, *Rationality and Religion* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), pp. 209-214.

[115] See, *The Meaning of Freedom*, pp. 190-221.

[116] Chapter 18 of the *The Book of Revelation* gives an account of the trading arrangements going on between the 'centre' (Rome) and the 'periphery' (its conquered colonies), which echo global economic relations in the 21st. century. It is not surprising that the writer intones a lament over the city-state, because it is under judgement and will collapse.

[117] T.R. Glover, *The Jesus of History* (Montana: Kessinger Publishing, 2005, first published in 1914), p. 217; also, *The Conflict of Religions in the Early Roman Empire* (London: Methuen, 1910), chapter V.

However, the task is not for self-aggrandisement, but for the sake of helping to repair the damage being done to human life by the tacit acceptance of cultural assumptions which have torn apart the unity and wholeness of knowledge. This study is offered as a way of showing *why*, culturally and ethically, the task is so vital, and *how*, epistemologically, it might be accomplished.

CHRISTIAN MISSION AND THE EPISTEMOLOGICAL CRISIS OF THE WEST[118]

Introduction

There is a sense in which the epistemological crisis of any culture is the 'mother of all its crises'. Epistemology explores the very foundation of its modes of perceiving, thinking, communicating and knowing. When there is a break down of the culture's consensus regarding the nature of reality, the possibility and criteria of truth and the scope and function of reason, almost every other aspect of its existence - art forms, educational policies, attitudes to health and healing, the working of its institutions, the position of its traditional religious undergirding, its patterns of family life and many more - will be profoundly affected. Christian mission in the West, if it is to be self-reflective, has to explore with deep and sensitive understanding the issues that are involved in this crisis and ponder long and hard on its own specific response.

Christian Mission

Missiology as an intellectual discipline is concerned to reflect critically on the content and practice of the Church's life and work as this is perceived theoretically and carried out in action. How does the Church envisage its calling? Why does it implement it in particular ways? What are the reasons for its apparent successes and failures? Can one aim to discover 'best practice' in a wide variety of circumstances? It assumes that there is a given imperative which urges it on to undertake specific tasks and refrain from others and a particular social, political and cultural context in which to work out its mission.

In recent years there has been a vigorous debate across the whole spectrum of Christian churches world-wide concerning the extent to which mission is an un-changing task entrusted to Christian communities and the extent to which its implementation is freshly discovered (or rediscovered) in each new generation, acknowledging an always tentative, contingent and fallible grasp of its nature. What-ever the balance of conviction and certainty any person or group may possess or lack, there can be no talk of mission without the assumption that there is a definite calling to which the response should be obedience and fulfilment.

Some people are convinced that the Church needs to invent its mission imaginatively in response to the rapidly changing kaleidoscope of events that characterizes contem-porary Western culture. It is said that it must learn to shed the accumulated baggage inherited from the past, as simply the fallible attempts of former generations of Christians to make sense of their calling in vastly different circumstances. In the hands of such people, this stance may involve the virtual abandonment of any distinctive Christian content in their attempt to witness to their faith. Among contemporary theologians such a position is perhaps most clearly discerned in the case of Don Cuppitt, though in varying degrees among several others as well.

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[118] J. Andrew Kirk and Kevin Vanhoozer (eds.), *To Stake a Claim: Mission and the Western Crisis of Knowledge* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1999), pp. 157-171.

Although the classical formulations of faith and traditional methods of mission may cause acute embarrassment to such people, they do not (cannot) start to think Christian mission as it were *ex nihilo*. Both their 'mission' involvement and their reflection upon it will inevitably entail the acceptance of certain presuppositions which they take as substantive starting-points. These, of course, may be just as much baggage from the past as the traditions which they believe to be no longer tenable[119]. Discarding any element from the past or present, if the process is to be self-reflective and not a matter merely of intuition or whim, necessitates a mechanism of justification based on more adequate grounding.

The question then becomes one of criteria. Here, I believe, there is no possibility of sheer invention, for, if it is true that all human beings are, to a degree, children of their age, they will use ideas, language, thought-forms and practices already available to them within their horizon of experience. There may be a certain amount of creativity discernable in new combinations of thought taken from different sources. However, it is extremely rare that anyone in the field of Christian mission hits upon genuinely unthought-of and untried concepts and practices. Those whose musings are declared by the media to be *radical*, in the sense of being shocking to conventional wisdom, are usually combining ideas taken from other traditions and applying them to their understanding of Christian faith, not abandoning tradition altogether.

This argument is designed to show that in practice, when considering Christian mission everyone is obliged to work with traditions that they have chosen to believe are more or less compelling. The vitality of their vision lies in the strength of the grounds they hold for justifying it. For this reason it is much truer to actual procedure to talk about *re*inventing or *re*thinking Christian mission within changing contexts than to give the impression that one is capable of reinventing the wheel *de novo*. It is true to experience that our reflection always happens on the basis of given traditions which we find sufficiently convincing, either because of their intellectual consistency, their ability to offer an explanation for the fundamental questions of existence, including those of other explanations, or their ability to achieve a fully satisfied life.

This essay is built on the conviction that there is no other way *in practice* in which we can proceed rationally. To the objection that explanations of life or the achievement of personal meaning offer futile and unprofitable expectations, I would reply that such a counter-conviction can only mean anything on the basis of counter-presuppositions which in turn need justifying.

To envisage missiology as a discipline that seeks adequate criteria to discern between good and bad mission theory and practice means taking one's stance within a particular tradition that provides such criteria. Critical reflection means in the first place using the standards or norms of the tradition itself to judge the adequacy of the mission undertaken. Of course, it will also involve opening itself to criticism that comes from outside its own tradition, in order to re-evaluate not only its current practice, but the adequacy of its justifying foundation.

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[119] In the case of Don Cuppitt, for example, see the discerning analysis of his own particular indebtedness to the past in S.N.Williams, *Revelation and Reconciliation: A window on modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 113-142.

In the light of the discussion so far, I would like to attempt a brief summary of what I take to be the foundation of Christian mission within the tradition inherited and accepted by the vast majority of Churches and what I take to be certain aberrations which have been criticized from outside the tradition and found subsequently to be inconsistent with the norms of the tradition itself. Christian self-identity is built on the foundation of Jesus Christ, both as an historical person who lived in a particular way and communicated a particular message, and on the interpretation of his significance given by the original disciples (called apostles)[120]. In other words, certain hypotheses concerning the nature and mission of Jesus Christ form the basis for Christian mission *prior to* Christians engaging with society and culture. These hypotheses spring out of a particular interpretation of God's intentions in dealing with the Hebrew people.

The Church has gone wrong, according to its own criteria of judgement, whenever it has sought 'secular' power for itself as a means to achieve its missionary ends, whenever it has used coercion or unworthy incentives to force people into accepting its teaching, or whenever it has depended on a socially-privileged position to spread the gospel. In the first instance, it has sought to represent the goal and interests of the whole of society, rather than being salt or leaven within society; in the second instance, it has used weapons, forbidden to it in its founding message, to bring about conversion or conformity; in the third instance, it has used ends to justify unacceptable means.

When speaking about Christian mission in the light of the epistemological crisis of the West, it is vitally important to know how to distinguish between the ends of mission and the means used to achieve them. In Christian thinking ends determine means and means either proclaim or distort the ends. What is justifiable to do is strictly controlled by the message itself. The import of these affirmations will become clearer as we seek to engage missiologically with the West's epistemological crisis. To this we now turn.

The Epistemological Crisis of the West

Many of the arguments advanced so far are based on lines of reasoning profoundly disputed by certain current epistemological conclusions. Thus, for example, the notion that one may still argue from the basis of *foundational beliefs* which do not need any further justification seems to have been refuted two and a half centuries ago by Hume's arguments in *A Treatise of Human Nature*. The desire to achieve some kind of

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[120] The issues surrounding the interaction of faith and history in the shaping of the New Testament are immense; they have been explored from almost every conceivable angle by critical scholarship over a period of two hundred years. My own general view about this vast amount of work is that reliable historical method requires a rigorous distinction being made between a critical sifting of evidence and speculation. Scepticism with regard to the historical reliability of the New Testament has almost always arisen as a result of the over-indulgence of speculative theories. The most recent survey of the evidence has been accumulated by Tom Wright in the first two volumes of his projected five volume study with the overall title, *Christian Origins and the Question of God*: these are, *The New Testament and the People of God* and *Jesus and the Victory of God* (London: SPCK, 1994 and 1996). He shows that historical investigation, shorn both of methodological naïveté and inappropriate rationalist assumptions, comes face to face with an uncompromisingly real person impossible to portray as a mere figment of faith.

indubitable foundation for all true knowledge is question-begging and therefore inevitably leads to a radical scepticism that anything can be known, outside the inclinations of the mind to believe something. Building on this criticism, Wittgenstein says that the justification for our beliefs cannot go beyond the acknowledgement that "this is what we do". In other words, there is no way of adequately distinguishing between opinion ("this is what I happen to believe") and justified true belief ("this is what all self-critically thinking persons ought to believe").

The position advocated here, that Christian missiology begins with propositions that are, in principle, distinguishable from contingent cultural formulations of them, is radically disputed on a number of grounds that have almost become accepted as in themselves not depending on any further justified belief. There is the argument from *relativism.* All claims to knowledge and truth are relative to the times and circumstances in which they are formulated. There are no neutral criteria which can be universally applied to judge between standards of evaluation of these claims. The Christian claim that the New Testament message about Jesus Christ is universally valid and applicable is to be explained by the contingent necessities of historical context, cultural dominance or psychological need, for it flies in the face of the multiple interpretations of reality in existence for which, it is alleged, there is no adjudicating yard-stick.

Closely connected to the relativism inherent in the acceptance of multi-cultural pluralism is the notion that *truth-claims* invariably reflect the 'will-to-power'. Most powerfully stated in Foucault's work on the genealogies of certain institutions, this interpretation of human history makes much of the influence of official ideologies which are manufactured to justify a particular status quo and then backed by the most powerful institutional authorities of the day.[121] Truth-claims then operate in society by excluding difference and, through enforcing consensus and uniformity, abolish the precious commodity of individual freedom. They are little more than adjuncts to the messy business of securing and maintaining the power of some over others.

Another way of approaching the question of truth is to deny the possibility of any access to objective *reality.* It is common today to find fault with the notion of reality as a picture or mirror of something that exists independently of the observing person and thinking mind. It may be argued that reality only exists as it appears and therefore that the real-in-itself cannot be distinguished from a reproduction or simulation of the real. Our apprehension of what we take to be real is always situated in language systems, which are simply instruments that have evolved for thought and communication to be possible. Language is a sign-system that, because it does not correspond to any univocal facts beyond the power of language to evoke them as such, is open to the endless play of invention. In other words, we create our own realities as we so desire.

There is a further logical step from this way of seeing reality to a *pragmatic* notion of truth. Truth is *created* in order to enable us to cope with our experience of life. What is true is what is good for us to believe if we are to function optimally in a given

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[121] See, D.Hawkes, *Ideology* (New York: Routledge, 1996), pp. 1-12.

context. Clearly this may vary from situation to situation, and cannot therefore be prejudged.

From Modernity to Postmodernity

The epistemological crisis of the West is often summed up in the much-quoted, but not very precise, assertion that Western culture is in the process of transition from the age of *modernity* to the age of *postmodernity*. Epistemologically, modernity is characterized as that period of history in which the human person is conceived as a self-sufficient autonomous subject requiring no external support for his or her knowledge, either in God or in nature[122]. Critical, enlightened human reason was adequate to comprehend all that was necessary for the ordering of human life on the foundation of scientifically demonstrable universal laws. From now on it would be possible for human society to base its knowledge on evidence accessible to all and intrinsically open to verification or falsification. Such a situation would lead, sooner rather than later, to humanity abandoning its commitment to unfounded beliefs, whose conflicting nature could never be resolved as they were based on unprovable presuppositions. History then became intrinsically open to the possibility of a unified human race in which everyone would accept the self-evident truths of reason and gladly agree to harness them to overcome ignorance, superstition and intolerance which so degraded the inherent dignity of human nature.

Postmodernity is the name given to the period of history in which the supreme value of critical reason as a foundation for the emancipation and progressive development of human life is no longer believed. It marks a dramatic act of 'unbelief' or, as Lyotard stated it, "incredulity towards meta-narratives"; in this case the self-legitimation of science as the bearer of internal and external emancipation.[123]

The critical element of doubt surrounds the ability to create an unshakable relationship between the observing, classifying and understanding subject and the world of objects immediately accessible to intelligent assessment. In other words, the fundamental distinction between the real world of nature and the fictitious worlds of imagination has been broken. The situation then becomes one of 'hyper-reality' (Baudrillard), in which the distinction between objects and their representations becomes dissolved; one is left only with '*simulacra.*'[124]

What has led to the rejection of the exaggerated claims of modern rational thought is the suspicion, based on social and cultural analysis, that scientific method in all realms of investigation was being used to enhance the control of an elite minority of professionals over ordinary citizens (George Bernard Shaw defined a profession as a conspiracy against ordinary people). Excess dependence on rationality has led to an almost uncontrolled desire to use knowledge to dominate and manipulate. Because of its universalizing claim to be the measure of all things, there is no transcendent bar of

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[122] See, Richard Kearney, *Modern Movements in European Philosophy* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994) p.288.

[123] See, David West, *An Introduction to Continental Philosophy* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996), pp. 189ff; Hans Bertens, *The Idea of the Postmodern: A history* (London: Routledge, 1995), pp. 111-137.

[124] Cf. D. Lyon, *Postmodernity* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1994), p. 16.

accountability: reason is judge, jury, prosecutor and counsel for the defense in its own cause.

Postmodernity is iconoclastic. Frederic Jameson has identified four critical models of understanding which have been pervasive in modern times, but that are now challenged to their core: the distinction between essence and appearance (for example, in concepts of ideology and false consciousness); the gap between the latent and the manifest (for example, in the Freudian understanding of repression); the choice between authenticity and inauthenticity (in the existentialist account of alienation), and the differentiation between signifier and signified (in theories of language).[125] The net result is an all-pervading sense of uncertainty and instability, a constant challenging of the once accepted, unshakable foundations of apparently well-tested knowledge of the *real* world.

The Challenges to Christian Mission

Just when the Churches of the West were coming to terms with the culture of modernity (in particular with the strengths and weaknesses of a scientific world-view), a very different approach to the experience of life is presenting itself.[126] On the evidence of history so far, it may take a long time for the Churches fully to appreciate the nature of the current challenges and, in particular, to be able to handle criteria sufficiently rigorous to give some confidence that it knows how to distinguish between genuine insights and false trails.

The sustained attack on foundationalism, particularly in its form of a meta-narrative that claims to be able to give a comprehensive, intelligent and consistent account of the great questions of human life, is serious for a faith that takes for its starting-point a story. Because of the evocative power of story-telling and the intrinsic attraction of stories which encompass the full range of human life (epic, heroicism, tragedy, comedy, confrontation, reconciliation) told sometimes in straight narrative, sometimes in poetic form or through proverbs, metaphors and symbols, Christians in the late twentieth century have increasingly emphasized the communicative power of the Bible as story and invited listeners to find meaning for their story in the light of *the* story.

Implicit in the method, however, is the claim that in the story of Jesus as told by his earliest followers is set forth the answer to the most perplexing conundrums of human life, wherever lived and by whomever. This story is the measure of all others. This life is the measure of the meaning of liberation and freedom.[127] All other stories, however profound and noble they may be, are ultimately defective in their ability to explain the greatness of human achievement and remedy the colossal effects of human failure.

As we have already seen, such claims appear no longer to be sustainable, even if they are shorn of all vestiges of triumphalism. For one thing, to use the terminology of

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[125] See, *Modern Movements*, p. 166.

[126] See, for example, among many other works, M.Rae, H. Regan, J.Stenhouse, *Science and Theology: Questions at the Interface* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1994).

[127] See, J. Andrew Kirk, *Loosing the Chains: Religion as opium and liberation.* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1992), pp 194-201.

one story is to be guilty, in the words of Roland Barthes, of an "authoritarian discourse"[128] i.e. a language of power whose intention is to create submission. For another thing, one must not imagine that the story encodes a fixed, clearly defined discourse with a fundamentally univocal meaning. If one follows a post-structuralist stance then the text allows "a libertine excess of multiple signification", "an infinitely playful performance of signification". The importance of this point of view is that the claim to an authoritative interpretation of the text is subverted, undermining "all hierarchical systems of language which institutionalize one form of discourse by repressing all non-conformist alternatives."[129]

The consequence of this proposition is that no controlling meaning can be given to the text which would exclude any others.[130] People of other faiths and none may quite legitimately read into and out of the text whatever they please. The Christian claims are quite simply one possible perspective among equals. If this is an acceptable approach to the basic Christian text, then clearly claims to truth based on the singularity of its message and the origin of its thought have nowhere to go, they vanish ephemeral-like into the shadow world of every person's opinion.

Earlier we stated that Christian mission is based on a conscious response to an imperative understood to emanate unambiguously from God. However the imperative is thought to be mediated, mission by its nature is consequent upon there existing an obligation acknowledged and acted on[131] . The language of imperative and obligation assumes some kind of unconditional responsibility laid upon one to act in a certain way. Such notions do not fit a culture where the relativity of truth and values is taken as being beyond the need for demonstration. It is not surprising that the concept of Christian mission causes acute embarrassment to those who have imbibed the intoxicating pluralism of human self-expression.[132]

Pragmatic notions of truth are unlikely to sustain a sense of mission either. If the criterion of truth is its ability to illuminate an individual's experience and orient him or her towards a goal in life which he or she finds personally meaningful, then persuasion to believe and act on a particular message as the only one having the inherent power to make sense of life for everyone, however gently accomplished, will be sternly resisted on the grounds that what is 'true' for one person may well not be 'true' for another. What is important is that *my sense* of the divine and of right and wrong are made more coherent and serviceable. It is this attitude to truth which underlies the notion that a Christian's greatest responsibility to people of another faith is to help them, when invited, to deepen their commitment to their own

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[128] *Modern Movements*, p. 329.

[129] *Modern Movements*, pp. 329-30.

[130] See, Nicholas Wolterstorff's presentation and critique of Derrida's theory of signification, *Divine Discourse*, pp. 157-169.

[131] Paradoxically this is true also for those who see their 'mission' to be the debunking of all claims to possess a mission.

[132] Thus G.M. Thomas observes: "Freedom must consist (according to the moderns) in would-be monks being able to become monks and would-be tarts becoming tarts if they so wish...Choices will have to be made in an unencumbered fashion from a virtually infinite menu of potentialities." G.M.Tamas, 'A Clarity interfered with' in T.Burns (ed.), *After History: Francis Fukuyama and his Critics* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 1994), pp. 89-90.

traditions of symbolization as a means of integrating more consistently their own experience of life. Any other approach is rejected as overweening presumption.

Ways of responding to the Challenges

Christians can and have reacted in a number of different ways to the mission challenges posed by the diversity of changes taking place throughout Western society. By adapting somewhat the typology suggested by Richard Niebuhr in his classic document, *Christ and Culture*,[133] we can identify the following four categories: escapism/privatization; absorption/cultural consensus; opposition/minority status; transformation/minority status.

Christians may decide that the issues (some of which we have identified here) are too complex and, in their opinion, too esoteric to bother about. In some ways it would appear to be easier not to have either to adapt to the changing scene, by devising new ways of formulating the message or of communicating it, or to challenge the assumptions lying behind the changes. The task of the Church remains, as it always has, the faithful exposition of an unchanging message to individuals. Irrespective of the cultural changes, the fundamental needs of human beings remain unchanged. The Church's main responsibility is to offer God's forgiveness and strength in the call for a new style of living following the way of Christ. Human beings, universally, need: a sense of worth, a community to live in they can trust, a hope for the future, care when living through times of distress. All these are offered in the unchanging gospel.

At the opposite end of the spectrum, some Christians are convinced that the familiar categories of thought by which the Church has expressed itself are no longer serviceable. The changes taking place in culture are irreversible. The message which the Church has traditionally proclaimed is not so much unbelievable as incomprehensible. The imperative is to attempt to proclaim and live Jesus Christ from within the thought-forms of a postmodern age. The cultural consensus is accepted: 'God's death' is affirmed as a positive value, because most images of God (mainly male, white, heterosexual, middle-aged and hierarchical) are repressive and, therefore, too dangerous to resurrect. The major contribution a Christian may be able to make within the cultural confusion left by the "shaking of the foundations" is to rediscover the identity of the self stripped of the false assurances of the past.[134]

There is a growing body of opinion that conceives the Church's mission in terms of faithful opposition: not in the wholly negative sense of finding fault with every aspect of contemporary culture, but in the discerning attitude of providing a set of values, an intellectual perspective and a community which offers a permanent alternative to current fashions.[135] The major hermeneutical key of such a position is the suspicion of idolatry on the part of institutions and intellectual trends. The abandonment of the

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[133] (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1951).

[134] Alain Touraine sees the greatest danger of the moment to be "a complete dissociation between system and actors, between the technical or economic world and the world of subjectivity". He believes this is a problem equally, though for different reasons, for those who defend the gains of modernity and those who believe the postmodern challenge is more hopeful. See his *Critique of Modernity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 5-6.

[135] The position has been associated in recent years particularly with the name of Stanley Hauerwas; see, for example, *After Christendom* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1991).

God of the prophetic initiative (explicit in all death-of-God pronouncements) is not a liberating act, but the submission to the greater slavery of intellectual and moral anarchy and arbitrariness. Above all, the Church must rigorously guard against all temptation to align itself with secular power, however sympathetic some programs and strategies may seem to be towards those values Christians would wish to defend.
The final category we have identified is that which, whilst also wishing to eschew the exercise of power *qua* Church, believes that the main assumptions of contemporary Western culture, whether in its modern or postmodern appearance need not only challenging but replacing. Whereas this position requires the Church as an institution to keep itself clear of involvement in the running of the institutions of society, it encourages Christians individually or collectively to work within institutions for new attitudes to human life which reflect the way of Christ. In other words, the goal of Christian mission is to seek a culture and society which, in every way, mirrors more closely the new resurrected order inaugurated by Jesus Christ.[136]
As with all categorization, there is a danger of caricaturing the different mission stances taken or of not allowing sufficiently subtle shades of differentiation. The four positions must be understood as general tendencies, and ones which are not necessarily mutually exclusive. I will continue by giving an account of what I consider is the best way of grasping the opportunities for missiology presented by the present epistemological crisis. I will use the heuristic device utilized so successfully (in my judgement) by liberation theology, following the methodological lead given by Paolo Freire in his pioneering work in popular education: *see, judge, act.*

See, Judge, Act

The first step for missiological reflection is carefully to examine through a systematic analysis the real nature of the crisis. This is not a task that Christians need necessarily initiate or carry through on their own. In many ways the work has already been done, either implicitly or explicitly, by many people engaged in the epistemological debate who may own a variety of different faith perspectives. In my estimation, the crisis can best be summed up in the one word *inconsistency.* Within the different thought-processes examined in the first part of this volume which have provided such a multiplicity of epistemological options, one may notice in varying degrees a lack of consistency. This is true within the intellectual tradition itself; it often becomes even more evident when thought is applied to moral reasoning and ethical action.
Inconsistency manifests itself as a fundamental contradiction between two or more axioms or statements or between an intellectual stance and practical living. It means that if one is to be accepted as valid, the other has to be denied. It is based on the premise that two, or more, propositions cannot disagree and both be right. It may be discerned in a line of reasoning, when conclusions are reached that are incompatible with the premises of the argument. It is also obvious when moral positions are taken that seem to bear no resemblance to the logic of the person's theoretical stance. Its most celebrated formulation is in the so-called 'law of non-contradiction' that asserts

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[136] This position has been clearly set out in a number of significant books by Lesslie Newbigin: cf., for example, *Truth to Tell: The Gospel as Public Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991).

that when two (or more) statements contradict each other they cannot both be correct, (though they could, of course, both be false).[137]

One might well ask why consistency in thinking and living is deemed to be such an important principle that it is erected into the key for understanding the contemporary crisis. After all, there are not lacking those who deny the universal applicability of the law of non-contradiction. This has been particularly true in philosophical thought associated with eastern religions. The response has to be twofold. First, in practice, there is literally no other way that thinking can proceed. In order to deny the law of non-contradiction, one has to invoke it. Secondly, to think coherently and to be able to make one's actions harmonize with one's thinking is to enhance the dignity of human life. Inconsistency degrades and debilitates the meaning of human existence.[138]

It is vitally important in a missiological perspective that one does not exempt the mission agent from the critique of inconsistency. An accusation directed elsewhere and refused for oneself is generally given the name of hypocrisy. Unfortunately, there is too much evidence of that within the thinking and practice of the Church. Therefore, the analysis of the crisis must encompass the intellectual tradition and life of the Christian community.

Let us now turn to the issues we noted when looking at the epistemological predicament of the West. The rejection of foundationalism may seem to be self-evident, because access to universally recognized and indubitable knowledge is simply not possible. However, the apparent alternatives do not seem to leave one with any resting-place at all. Thought is caught between the rock of scepticism and the hard place of relativism; neither of which can be consistently maintained.[139]

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[137] There have been attempts to refute the law of non-contradiction in its form as 'the law of the excluded middle' by asserting the ambiguity of referents in some sentences that appear to be contradictory. However, once the meaningfulness in context of the proposition is established and the scope of the language is identified, the logic of the law holds. Cf. Mark Sainsbury, 'Philosophical Logic' in A.C. Grayling (ed.), *Philosophy*, pp. 81-84.

[138] There are some legitimate objections to what appears to be the rigid application of an invariable law. These encompass those situations where the only way of doing justice to a full range of complex evidence seems to be the formulation of explanations which appear to invoke contradictory statements. The two most celebrated, from very different disciplines, might be the formulation of the movement of light and the Christian understanding of God as Trinity. Whether, or not, these are exceptions to the general rule is debatable, and the discussion beyond the scope of this essay; the important principle is that the law is valid because it demonstrably covers the vast majority of cases.

[139] For the impossibility of maintaining a relativistic approach to ethical values, see my argument in *Loosing the Chains*, pp. 53-66, 165-176. With regard to scepticism, the common-sense argument of Thomas Reid (a contemporary of Hume's) that life can only be lived on the basis that complete scepticism is unwarranted seems to be a sufficient rebuttal. We can only act on the assumption that effects have causes and that a real internal and external world exists. So, Stephen Nathanson, *The Ideal of Rationality: A defense within Reason* (Chicago: Open Court Press, 1994), pp. 208-212, and Robert Audi, *Epistemology*, pp. 308-313.

My "foundationalism" is methodological: actions spring from faith, in the sense explored by Juan Luis Segundo, *Faith and Ideologies* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1984), passim; when actions clash, the faith needs justifying; justification assumes a foundational authorization; when justifications clash, the authorizations are used as the ultimate judging criteria. My contention is that this is the way in which argumentation actually takes place, when there is a serious clash of interpretations about practice. I am not happy with the term "chastened foundationalism". Although I recognize in it a call to epistemic modesty, there is nothing to be ashamed of in adopting a carefully defined form of foundationalism. I would prefer to call it "modified" or "moderate presuppositional" foundationalism.

In practice all people, whatever their theory may say to the contrary, act on the basis of fundamental beliefs.[140] These are ones universally held by humankind, reflected in the common structure of all languages, whose negation is not merely false but absurd and which are necessary for engaging in the practical affairs of life.[141] It can be shown from careful observation of normal life that everyone acts on the basis of knowledge acquired, however fragmentary, which they do not justify by recourse to a deeper knowledge. Of course, such knowledge may be accepted as a working hypothesis and, therefore, be corrigible; but, at the point of action, it is decisive.

The questions of pluralism and truth may be dealt with in the context of moral reasoning. Again, in practice, no-one seriously believes that moral action can be encompassed either as a matter of personal taste or of the enforced decision of state or family. Universally, human beings consistently make moral judgements that assume an absolute code of practice; at least in some instances. This is the only way one can make sense of the paradoxical intolerance that the most liberally-inclined people show towards certain attitudes and actions. Though, according to a person's moral tradition, they may vary from case to case, there are moral limitations which everyone accepts. Perhaps, the most universally accepted would be the wanton exploitation of and cruelty towards vulnerable people (like children, the mentally and physically disabled and the old) and deliberate deceit. Even where a moral tradition allows an excess of moral liberty (as in libertarianism), it upholds the absolute (?) duty of all to respect the freedom of others.

The notion that truth can be identified with personal or group dispositions (what is true "for me" or "for us") is absurd. It empties truth of any meaning whatsoever, by allowing to it a purely private definition. Moreover, it makes a complete nonsense of the reality of error. If truth is identified with what seems right in my internal world, then what seems right *is* right. As long as I believe it, I cannot be in error. If, on the contrary, one acknowledges the possibility of error, then it follows that some criterion (external to myself) must be employed to distinguish what is false from what is true. Here, we do not have to argue from any particular definition of truth, only to demonstrate that in practice, invariably, people argue and act on the basis of believing that it exists as a reality external to individual desires and interests.

The belief that truth can be understood in pragmatic terms is question-begging. If the meaning of truth is to be defined by its utility in producing a good or useful outcome, the argument has not been advanced at all, unless we know what is the good and why. The good cannot be specified by appeal to the consequences it produces without further begging the question. Manifestly, the appeal to functionality is not an adequate explanation of ethical right, for wrong action can also work, according to the criteria adopted. There is no possibility here of short-circuiting the appeal to intrinsic values. Pragmatism is altogether too subjective to provide adequate guidance to right and wrong action, for as a guiding principle it is too easily confused with

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[140] This is the case though many deny it to be. Their reasoning is careful and sophisticated and yet, in my opinion, ultimately inconsistent. When I appeal to foundations, I am not seeking to defend 'classic foundationalism', if by that is understood the possibility of acquiring for any belief or interpretation of life the three main 'epistemic immunities' - immunity from *error*, from *refutation* and from *doubt*.

[141] See, J.Dancy and E. Sosa, *A Companion to Epistemology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), p.72.

opportunism. Nevertheless, the consequences of actions do provide an important consideration in judging between alternative choices; but only when tested against norms right or wrong in themselves.

If it is widely conceded that the reductionist rationalism of modernity is inherently incapable of satisfying the deepest intellectual and moral questions posed by human existence, the postmodern denouement probably fairs even worse. The problem of modernity does not lie with the limitations of reason, nor the use to which it has been put (instrumental reason), but the assumptions on which it has been used. It is a self-defeating exercise to attempt to begin with the empirical particulars of the natural world with the hope of being able to build theories that can make sense of the whole of experience. Explanations that begin and end with observable and verifiable causal sequences are doomed to conclude that human life is machine-like. The sensations of personal worth, moral values and ultimate purpose in existing have to be incomprehensible. Rationalism is bereft of the instruments necessary to fathom out this part of human experience. In a very real sense, the modern predicament, by posing a dilemma which it does not have the instruments to solve, makes human beings inferior to animals, for the latter do not possess these sensations and therefore do not experience a need to explain them.

The dilemma began when the culture in general accepted (following the arguments of Hume and Kant) that intellectual probity necessitated the assumption that the uniformity of natural causes required a closed-order universe. As a result, just as nature gradually swallowed up grace in the theology of the medieval period, so nature took the place of the revelatory and reordering activity of God within the world. The dilemma is acute. No longer is there a sufficient reason for believing with certainty that anything exists, or that there is an adequate correlation between the observer (subject) and the thing observed (the object) or that a meaningful distinction can be made between reality and fantasy. As Kant observed, reason supplies the human mind with regulative ideals, not constitutive ideas. In ethics reason guides our choice of principles on which to act, but does not supply those principles. In decision-making reason may help determine the means we appropriate to achieve desired ends, but the ends themselves are not discovered as necessary truths by rational intuition, as Descartes and Spinoza believed. Once revelation is considered impossible or irrelevant, the universe becomes silent except for the prolonged echo of merely human chatter reproducing itself.

In theological terms, the epistemological crisis is due to an idolatrous faith in the power of reason to bring the whole world of nature and of experience under its regulative principle. Reason itself is not at fault. The postmodern tendency, therefore, to delight in the irrational and the absurd kills the patient rather than curing the disease. The turn to carefree playfulness as a riposte to the drudgery of bureaucracy and the boredom and superficiality of endless consumerism marks a regress to childhood not a development to a fully responsible adulthood. As a matter of fact, its attention to variety, choice and the importance of minority interests is a perfect foil for the consumer culture. What may be said about the drive to consume may be said with identical language (substituting experience for goods and services) of the post-modern condition:

> "In general terms, modern Euro-American societies are characterized by the strongly rooted belief that *to have is to be ...;* this is related to the privileging of a relationship between individuals and things in terms of *possession* ...Indeed, most people describe possessions as aspects of the self, and their loss is experienced as personal violation and a lessening of the self. It is in this context that possessions have come to serve as key symbols for personal qualities, attachments and interests."[142]

The unpalatable truth is that postmodernity, if consistent to its own ideals, is pure escapism. Its deconstruction is reaction (and reactionary), for it has no grounds for reconstruction. Here again, it mirrors the results of the technological reason it so passionately despises:

> "It has been argued that consumption...is also driven by hedonism, escapism, fantasy and the desire for novelty or 'identity-value'"[143].

The flight into pure aesthetics[144] is a new form of the old romanticism: conservative, reactionary, sentimental, priestly rather than prophetic. Postmodern consciousness is forced, as was existentialism before it, to disregard its own ideals in order to reengage with political, moral debate.[145]

> "It seems that nothing is capable of reuniting things that have now been divorced for a hundred years. That is why political and social ideologies have disappeared and been replaced only by moralizing declarations which are momentarily moving, but which soon come to look laughable, hypocritical or even manipulative."[146]

The second step for missiological reflection is to invite[147] contemporary Western culture to consider the thesis that the destructive consequences of the inherent contradictions in its mode of thinking and between its thinking and action can be turned into new life by accepting the Gospel as the one perspective that gives sufficient grounds for the integration of thought and of theory and practice. This will be an arduous task, which, even if it is achieved in part[148] may not result in the

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142 Celia Lury, *Consumer Culture* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996), p. 7.

143 *Consumer* Culture, p. 46.

144 See, H.Bertens, *The Idea of the Postmodern*: "John Paoletti, in a discussion of postmodernism in the visual arts, speaks of 'those artists who assume the mysterious role of shaman in order to bring us closer to the verities of the complex and difficult-to-decipher environments that we inhabit'...The shaman's most utopian moment was voiced by Richard Palmer, who expressed the hope that a postmodern hermeneutics of performance' might restore to the interpreter his ancient shamanic-hermeneutical powers to reveal the hidden, to transform the understanding, even to heal the soul' " p.75 (see also pp. 87, 224).

145 Others too have noted Foucault's smuggling of critical standpoints into his work, without ever acknowledging or explaining them", D.Lyon, op. cit., p. 79; "One can only agree that the right to differ must be both universal and binding if difference wants to avoid being forced into unity," H. Bertens, op. cit., p. 195.

146 A.Tourain, op. cit., p. 191.

147 Following the critique of inconsistency, it is vitally important to couch the mission imperative in terms of invitation rather than proclamation. Whereas the latter has overtones of the crusade and invulnerability, the former bespeaks hospitality and exposure. However, it should be understood that the invitation is to a real, rich and satisfying Meal, not to a thread-bare board.

148 My own book, *The Meaning of Freedom: a study of Secular, Muslim and Christian views* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1998), is an attempt to engage in this task by looking at contemporary notions of freedom in the light of Christian faith.

invitation being accepted. Perhaps the hardest task for missiology is to procure a hearing; in the words of the title of this book 'to stake a claim' that is taken seriously. As far as epistemology is concerned, this task of integration awaits another opportunity. It will be one of the assignments still outstanding at the end of this present project. If the argument of this chapter has any weight, it cannot be done in isolation from the work of the other subgroups, particularly those working on the self-identity of the Church in history and on the meaning of the Church today. Integration involves thinking, being and doing. The subject of the missiological task must himself or herself seek as consistent a unity between the three, on the basis of the Gospel, as is possible to achieve in an imperfect world. Otherwise, he or she will contribute no more to the promised banquet than the meagre scraps with which the non-Christian world seeks to assuage its hunger.

THE CONFUSION OF EPISTEMOLOGY IN THE WEST AND CHRISTIAN MISSION[149]

Summary

Western culture is facing a major intellectual crisis, because it is confused about the meaning of truth, the relationship between belief and knowledge, and the nature and use of language. This article points out some of the consequences and suggests a new way of meeting contemporary cognitive challenges to communicating Christian faith.

Introduction

The title may not seem very promising. In a quick association of ideas, epistemology and mission do not seem closely related.[150] Surely, there are more important mission concerns. For example, what about the stubborn problems that arise from the process of secularisation, at the heart of which is a massive indifference to any supra-natural reality? Then again, although some writers believe we live in a post-ideological age, the all-embracing phenomenon of 'globalisation' presupposes a powerful ideology, all the more perilous for being implicit rather than overt. Ethical and cultural relativism is now assumed to such a degree, that a putative burden of proof seems to rest on those who would dispute it. Last, but not least, the equal validity of all religious beliefs is taken for granted by most self-respecting liberal thinkers as self-evident; conversely, those who still wish to hold to the exclusive truth of their faith are dismissed as anachronistic fundamentalists. However, interestingly, each one of these issues embodies deep epistemological premises and theories. Relativism, for example, the view that all beliefs are proportionate to particular circumstances and no belief can claim to be universally valid, because there are no generally agreed standards for ascertaining truth, only transitory and localised consensus, is a claim to knowledge about a reality open to examination. Epistemology is simply that discipline which studies the articulated or unexpressed convictions that all people have about what and how it is possible to know. As such, it deals with the assumptions that underlie any assertion that people make about any aspect of life. Though probably unrecognised by most people most of the time, its' subject matter is any piece of thinking. Action, in so far as it follows a process of self-conscious reflection, depends on epistemic principles.

The case for taking epistemology seriously as a crucial subject for mission does not have to be made a priori; it should become obvious in the course of our study. Nevertheless, we do have to establish concretely that, at present in the West,

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[149] *Tyndale Bulletin*, 55.1, 2004, pp. 131-156.

[150] To my knowledge the only published work, which explicitly relates mission to epistemology, is J. Andrew Kirk and Kevin Vanhoozer, *To Stake a Claim: Mission and the Western Crisis of Knowledge* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2000). However, Lesslie Newbigin in a number of books, written towards the end of his life, on mission in the West implicitly refers to some epistemological issues in his analysis and critique of the Enlightenment, see, for example, his *Truth to Tell.* His debt to the philosophy of Michael Polanyi is well known. See also, Paul Weston, 'Gospel, Mission and Culture: The Contribution of Lesslie Newbigin' in David Peterson (ed.), *Witness to the World* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1999), pp. 32-62, and Colin Gunton, 'Knowledge and culture: towards an epistemology of the concrete,' in Hugh Montefiore (ed.), *The Gospel and Contemporary Culture* (London: Mowbray, 1992), pp. 84-102.

confidence in the ability to know anything is in deep trouble. We will seek to do this by showing how canons of rationality, objectivity and truth are being vigorously contested from a number of different angles. Then, we have to demonstrate that the ensuing confusion is deeply significant for Christian mission. Finally, it will be necessary to outline briefly and tentatively ways in which the Christian community might respond as a part of its given vocation to mission.

By the West I mean the shared cultural values, achievements and expectations that have developed from the history of the Western peninsular of the Asian landmass, since the flourishing of Hellenic society from the 6th century BC onwards. By mission I mean the process by which the Christian faith is communicated and becomes established across boundaries, whether these be geographical, cultural, ideological, linguistic, ethnic, or of any other kind. The challenges, opportunities and barriers to believing and living the good news of Jesus Christ form a substantial part of the study of mission. One of its major concerns, therefore, has to be the relation between Christian speech and action and the different elements of culture.[151] This is why students of mission have to interest themselves in other disciplines, like epistemology, even though they may not be their central concern.

Epistemology as a discipline

In its most general sense, epistemology refers to 'the theory of knowledge and justification.'[152] Knowledge has been understood classically as 'justified true belief.'

Hence, the justification of beliefs is central to its concerns. Justification deals with reasons for belief, namely the evidence which is brought to bear to substantiate statements which purport to be about some reality. How does one know that something affirmed is the case? What warrants one to make truth claims?

The claim to know something is more than having justified beliefs about it, for it is possible to be justified in believing a proposition on the basis of a virtuous cognitive process and still be in error. It is normal, for example, to believe a fact on the basis of the testimony of a hitherto reliable witness, and one would be warranted in so doing. However, the witness may decide to play a practical joke (it being the 1st of April) by distorting some incident or may simply, in all innocence, misinterpret some occurrence. Therefore, in order to know that fact, by removing all reasonable doubt, additional information will be necessary. In other words, knowing something is equivalent to ascertaining its status as truth.

In many ways, epistemology concerns itself with the question of the meaning of truth and the criteria that must be adopted in order to be able to distinguish true from false statements. The latter lead us on to the question of the foundations of knowledge: on what possible basis can I claim to know the truth? This issue has proved to be one of the most controversial in the history of epistemological discussion. A number of

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151 For further understanding of mission, see, Roger Bowen, *So I Send You: A Study Guide to Mission* (London: SPCK, 1996) and *What is Mission?*

152 Robert Audi, *Epistemology*, p. 1.

different answers have been given.[153] Classically, it has been asserted that reliable knowledge has to be founded on beliefs that do not themselves need justifying for they are either self-evidently true, incorrigible or immediately evident to the senses. Because of alleged difficulties in this position, known as *foundationalism*, other alternative theories have been put forward.[154] Thus, *conventionalism* argues that the basis for true statements is their concordance with the conventional uses of language, i.e. the ways in which words and signs relate to one another according to generally accepted rules.[155] *Coherentism*, the main challenger in contemporary epistemology to the classical view,[156] stipulates that what makes one belief justified and another not is the way it coheres with a particular set of background beliefs.[157] *Pragmatism* suggests that beliefs are best justified by their practice; their truth-value is dependent on the success of their practical outcome.[158] Finally, *reliabilism* states that a belief is justified just in case it is based on reasons that are reliable indicators of the truth, produced by cognitive processes that are generally reliable.[159]

The nature of the present epistemological confusion

Historical antecedents

In synthesis, the increasing uncertainty about the possibility of finding any proper basis for knowledge is due to a widespread belief that all forms of foundationalism, because of the problem of infinite regression in the chain of epistemic justifications, are inherently defective, and that all the alternatives proposed are equally, if not more, vulnerable. In many circles, the attempt to construct a system of knowledge on an immovable basis that is clear, universally valid and indubitable has been abandoned. It is as if one age had passed irrevocably and given rise to another whose mood is characterised by ambivalence, indecision and mistrust.[160]

Like all transitional situations there is a history. The birth of the modern world can be dated with some precision to the first successes in discovering how the universe functions, as these confirmed the validity of the broadly empirical procedures of the emerging sciences. For want of a better point in time we might nominate 1660, the year in which the Royal Society was founded in London.[161] Epistemologically one

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153 It is beyond the scope of this study to discuss all the possibilities in detail. It is, however, worth mentioning that not all views are mutually exclusive, and some people prefer to see a combination of at least some as the best possible guarantee that one can be truly justified in having certain beliefs.

154 See, Hugo Meynell, 'Faith, Foundationalism and Wolterstorff,' in Linda Zagzebski (ed.), *Rational Faith: Catholic Responses to Reformed Epistemology* (Notre Dame, University of Notre Dame Press, 1993), pp. 92-99.

155 This view has been argued most cogently by Alfred Tarski, *Logic, Semantics, Metamathematics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956).

156 See, Robert Audi, *The Structure of Justification* (Cambridge: CUP, 1993), pp. 117-164.

157 This view is most closely associated with the philosophers, Rescher and Bonjour c.f., Nicholas Rescher, *The Coherence Theory of Truth* (Oxford: OUP, 1973); Bonjour, *The Structure of Empirical Knowledge* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985). However, in the case of Bonjour, see n. 253.

158 See, Richard Rorty, *The Consequences of Pragmatism* (Hassocks: Harvester, 1982).

159 W.J. Talbot, *The Reliability of the Cognitive Mechanism* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1990).

160 It has to be said that this mood permeates the intellectual world of philosophy, it is not necessarily true of the scientific community nor of the business world which relies on the technological achievements of science.

161 The French Academy of Sciences followed in 1666.

might say that this birth was a neutral coming into being. Fundamental changes in people's ways of thinking began only when particular assumptions were linked to the scientific enterprise. Out went Aquinas, Luther and Calvin, in came Bacon, Locke and Descartes.

Bacon championed a straightforward account of the discovery of the natural world through empirical induction, in which laws and theories of science are built up out of systematic processes of observation and testing. Inductive inference is a matter of weighing the evidence, judging probabilities and drawing likely conclusions with regard to some aspect of the natural world.[162] Bacon was supremely confident that the method would produce a true understanding of the Book of Nature for the immense benefit of humankind. The empirical method was further elaborated by John Locke. He espoused the view that all ideas come ultimately from experience through a process of integrating sensations, derived from the observation of external objects, and reflection, as the introspective awareness of the activities of the mind.[163]

Descartes, on the other hand, was aware of the sceptics challenge to a too naïve reliance on the immediate availability of data to the human senses. Unlike the empiricist, he did not believe it possible to rely on the data of the senses to give unconditional knowledge. In order to stem any conceivable sceptical regress against the claims for certain knowledge, he turned inward to contemplate the operation of the mind. He sought to adduce axioms that could be seen to be self-evidently true to the faculty of intellectual intuition, as long as humans' rational mechanisms remained unimpaired, because they were clear, distinct and free from internal contradiction. It is possible, he reasoned, that most of what we conceive to be knowledge about the world could be undermined either by the unreliability of the senses, or by being unable to distinguish between the state of being awake or that of dreaming, or by a malicious demon who was able to deceive us into believing we had direct contact with the external world or even that the apparently cast-iron certainty of mathematical and geometrical conclusions might be false. Nevertheless, it is quite impossible to doubt that we are thinking.

His method is an attempt to overcome the lingering doubt that must always be there in the empirical method, namely that the human mind truly is in contact with real external objects. The certainty of knowledge can only be justified ultimately in the mechanisms of the reasoning subject which is able to demonstrate that doubt is self-contradictory: the very process of doubt uncovers the existence of a thinking subject; I can only doubt by thinking, therefore I am. The intuited and incontestable axiom of the *cogito* is a sufficient and efficient causality for other types of knowledge. Descartes' thesis has subsequently been regarded by many commentators as the first attempt to construct a foundation for knowledge that would have immunity from error (be infallible), from refutation (be incorrigible) and from doubt (be indubitable).

Descartes' process of reflection has been called the 'rationalist turn' in Western philosophy, and it is a defining moment. In treating the notion of reality as dependent

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[162] See, Richard Tarnas, *The Passion of the Western Mind*, p. 275.

[163] His theory of perception has been called an indirect representative realist theory because he believed that objects have the power to cause ideas in our minds, see, *Philosophy: A Guide through the Subject*, pp. 488-508.

on what is clear and self-evident to the mind, Descartes has ended up in an unbridgeable dualism between mind and matter. In order to try to reconnect to the sensible world, Descartes invoked the concept of God. God is the being who brings together rational faculties and a rationally ordered world. However, for Descartes, God is a necessary postulate to overcome the ultimate limitations of reason. As such a being cannot be demonstrated by reason alone, God has to be assumed. In order not to end up in a vicious circle, it is necessary to start from a position of faith, not of certainty. Faith, however, cannot logically refute an unyielding scepticism. Ultimately, one has to conclude that Descartes' ingenious scheme fails on its own terms.

In the attempt to found knowledge, whether empirical or axiomatic, on the autonomous human thinking subject in direct contact with the world or the mind, the modern epistemological dilemma was born. The human subject became divorced from the external object, with the result that scepticism about the real reality of the external world has pervasively influenced all discussion about noetic procedures, and human beings have condemned themselves to various forms of solipsism. Parallel to this, in the religious sphere, there was a notable move from theism, which heralded God as the initiator of knowledge, to deism, in which God was seen as an indispensable postulate to conserve the possibility of knowledge (not least by Isaac Newton[164]) to atheism, in which the hypothesis of God was abandoned altogether.[165] The consequence of this move was not only to posit naturalism as a self-sufficient account of the material world but also to erect Nature into a kind of human-transcending Subject that would perform at least some of the functions hitherto ascribed to the deity: most notably those of providing a sense of meaning to life and a foundation for morals.

An obscure philosopher from East Germany, 'aroused from his dogmatic slumbers' by the scepticism of David Hume sought to find a secure framework in which the validity of empirical knowledge could be substantiated against the sceptics. Kant conceded to Hume the objection against empiricism that human beings cannot know the world as it is in itself[166] and the critique of rationalism that objective knowledge cannot be attained by the use of reason alone. So, Kant argued, human beings cannot know things as they are in themselves, only as they are mediated to us in experience. The raw material is given through our intuitions, which are then organised, using concepts, so that we might understand the data we experience. Knowledge is only attainable by a synthesis of sensations of objects and prior organising principles, which are the categories of the mind. The latter are innate or a priori ideas, which have to be presupposed for knowledge to be possible at all. In order to answer the

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164 See, Michael Buckley, *At the Origins of Modern Atheism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), pp. 143-144.

165 The first modern thinker openly and systematically to espouse atheism was Diderot, followed by D'Holbach and many members of his Paris circle; see, *At the Origins*, pp. 194-321, Michael Hunter and David Wootton, *Atheism from the Reformation to the Enlightenment* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), pp. 273-300.

166 Hume's scepticism arose from his assertion that the experience of any object was no more than an experience of its impression, which, in conjunction with reflection, became a perception. Perceptions are elements or objects of the mind, not representations of external existences; see, David F. Norton (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Hume* (Cambridge: CUP, 1993), pp. 7-8, 107.

dilemma of both rationalists and sceptics, such concepts can be both analytic and synthetic, i.e. both presupposed and confirmed by actual experience.

Kant's response to Hume's challenge, clever as it is, fails to overcome the dichotomy between the autonomous mind and a real world. Objects can only be known through the mechanism of an interpreting mind, as phenomena that *appear* to us in a certain way. The implication is that the world is actually constituted by the mind's own categories. The only world available to human consciousness is that already organised within the mind's own processes. This means that the world cannot be known in a direct sense, only thought about. Kant has come no nearer to solving the problem of bringing together an objective reality and a subjective reflection on experience. As Richard Tarnas perceptively observes, Kant had only succeeded in rejoining 'knower to known, not knower to any objective reality…Knower and known were united, as it were, in a solipsistic prison. Man cannot know whether the internal ordering principles possess any ultimate relevance to a real world, or absolute truth outside the mind.'[167]

Although, perhaps, intellectually the most impressive attempt to overcome the dichotomy between an assumed empirical knowledge of the natural world and a sure confidence that it is indeed knowledge, Kant not only fails to solve it he actually makes it worse. He cannot escape from the prison of a self-referring subject to make contact with an objectively real world. He appears to have substituted the Cartesian absolute thinking subject with his own absolute experiencing subject, from which he works outward to his theory of a priori categories. However, the categories are themselves postulates of the mind necessary to make sense of experience; they are not derived from experience. They belong more to the designation noumena, the real *an sich* (in itself), than that of phenomena, the real as it appears to us.

The conclusion seems inevitable. As long as there is no dependable way of asserting the intrinsically absolute correspondence between a real universe and the human perception of it, human beings will be trapped in what Francis Bacon called 'the idols of the cave' (individually accepted mental creations) or 'the idols of the tribe' (collectively accepted mental creations).[168] The way was set for a continuing rift between the scientific enterprise, which has to assume epistemological realism in order to give an adequate explanation of its method, and yet which, in so far as it is positivistic and naturalist, has no adequate grounds for doing so, and other avenues to knowledge which appear to be trapped in an inescapable subjectivism. In the next section, we will explore how contemporary issues in epistemology follow as consequences of the split.

Contemporary issues

It is impossible to provide more than a brief summary of some of the most pressing dilemmas in the contemporary scene.[169] For the purpose of this paper, I will speak

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[167] *The Cambridge Companion to Hume*, p. 348.

[168] See, Mary Tiles and Jim Tiles, 'Idols of the Cave' in Linda Martin Alcoff, *Epistemology: The Big Questions*, pp. 423-424.

[169] A much fuller overview is given in *To Stake a Claim*, pp. 3-52.

briefly about three major questions, which I take to exhibit the main elements of the present confusion.

The justification of beliefs

We have already begun to discuss the various theories that have been advanced to legitimate the belief that one can know certain statements to be true. Foundationalism is the view that some beliefs are directly justified, either by being self-evidently true or immediately evident to the senses. All other beliefs are then dependent upon the foundational beliefs, as in the construction of an edifice. It has to be assumed that the regress of justified beliefs has an ultimate stopping place, a foundational belief that it would be rationally absurd to doubt.[170]

However, this notion has been disputed for a number of reasons. First, the idea that facts are somehow 'given' prior to being interpreted, and that beliefs can be justified on that basis, is dismissed as impossible, since all facts are always already theory-laden. Thus, one cannot rely upon unmediated information presenting itself to the senses in such a way that the sceptics challenge to demonstrate incorrigibility can be met. Second, the infinite regress problem cannot properly be avoided, since the beliefs used to justify other claims turn out in practice not to be indubitable, but dependent on the structure they are intended to justify.[171] Third, there appear to be a number of contradictory theories, viewpoints and statements equally well-founded, not all of which can be equally true. Moreover, it is alleged there is no non-arbitrary way of establishing one set of propositions as superior to another without arguing in a circle.[172]

The other main contender as a theory of justification is coherentism or holism. The central idea is that the justification of a belief depends on its coherence with other beliefs within a particular set. Beliefs, which are sufficient for knowledge, do not lie at the foundation of a building but make up an integrated web and their justification proceeds from being an appropriate fit within that pattern.[173] For those who hold to some form of holism the theory is superior to that of foundationalism in that it allows a multi-directional flow of reasoning and different kinds of connection between beliefs. It also takes into account the observation that data are always already dependent on theoretically accepted premises.[174]

However, the theory is not without its severe weaknesses. Systems of belief can be fully coherent within themselves and yet be (a) incompatible with other fully coherent systems of belief, such that only one could be completely true (or, all of them false), and (b) incompatible with what is otherwise generally and universally acknowledged

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[170] *A Companion to Epistemology*, pp. 144-147.

[171] Godel's theorem states "that for every sufficiently complex system of axioms and proof procedures there will always exist at least one indispensable axiom whose validity cannot be proved in terms of that same system," Christopher Norris, *Against Relativism: Philosophy of Science, Deconstruction and Critical Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), p. 22.

[172] See, Stephen T. Davis, *God, Reason and Theistic Proofs* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997), pp. 91-92.

[173] Robert Audi, *Epistemology*, pp. 189-190.

[174] See, Nancey Murphy, *Beyond Liberalism and Fundamentalism: How Modern and Postmodern Philosophy set the Theological Agenda* (Valley Forge: Trinity Press International, 1996), p. 94.

to be true. 'Without some independent indication that some of the beliefs within a coherent system are true, coherence in itself is no indication of truth…Our criteria for justification must indicate to us the probable truth of our beliefs. Hence within any system of beliefs there must be some privileged class with which others must cohere to be justified.'[175]

If scepticism seems to undermine foundationalism, relativism seems to be the logical outcome of holism. 'If we abandon foundationalism, we are able to defend all sorts of preposterous claims and theories by showing either that they are consistent with everything else in a person's noetic structure or that beliefs tend to produce helpful practical consequences.'[176] It is the notion that any part of the system can be suitably adjusted in order to turn aside the challenge of defeaters that suggests an underlying disregard for any notion of truth. It would seem as if epistemic standards of confirmation are internal to the system. There may be internal coherence, but then each web of beliefs is incommensurable with every other, and there appears to be no way of judging between them.

So unconvincing do the two foremost theories of justification seem to be that a number of thinkers wish to abandon epistemology altogether. For Richard Rorty, for example, all attempts at justification are allergic and anxiety-ridden reactions to the human condition, which cannot be transcended, of necessity possessing a historically and culturally contingent view of things. The only way we can approach knowledge is on the pragmatic basis that we refine our serendipitous language and methods to cope better with life as we know it.[177]

The use of language

Following the 'rationalist turn', inaugurated by Descartes, a second major shift in epistemological theory is connected with Wittgenstein. In between the publication of the *Tractatus* (1922) and the *Philosophical Investigations* (published in 1953, two years after his death) Wittgenstein had 'taken' a 'linguistic turn.' In the first instance, he sought to lay down a uniform, logical theory of language, which fixes the bounds of meaning. He adhered to a strong picture theory of language in which the words in a sentence stand for objects in the world in the same way that pictures represent entities in space. Thus, 'a picture is a model of reality. In a picture objects have the elements of the picture corresponding to them. In a picture the elements of the picture are the representatives of objects…A picture depicts reality by representing a possibility of existence and a state of affairs…A picture agrees with reality or fails to agree; it is correct or incorrect, true or false…The agreement or disagreement of its sense with reality constitutes its truth or falsity.'[178]

The 'first' Wittgenstein puts forward a robust representational view of language and a correspondence theory of truth. It is not surprising that his work was interpreted as

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[175] Alan Goldman, 'The Given' in *A Companion to Philosophy*, p.160.

[176] *God, Reason and Theistic* Proofs, p. 93.

[177] See, 'Pragmatism, Relativism and Irrationalism' in *Epistemology: The Big Questions*, pp. 336-348.

[178] Ludwig Wittgenstein, 'Picturing Reality' from *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1961), quoted in Andrea Nye (ed.), *Philosophy of Language: The Big Questions* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), pp. 44-46.

providing an empiricist theory of meaning, which excluded certain categories of discourse like those of morality, aesthetics and religion. However, at a later stage, Wittgenstein became convinced that this theory of language was too restricting. The 'second' Wittgenstein developed a rule-based or ordinary-language theory of meaning. The sense of a sentence is given not so much in its depiction of an objectively accessible reality, with which it corresponds in an unequivocal manner, as in its function within the ordinary usage of a given language. One comes to know the meaning of a sentence not by grasping its relationship to some external entity but by knowing how languages work. Words obey the internal rules of 'language-games' that just happen to function in particular ways. But they can only work effectively, and solipsism be defeated, where the language-using community agrees on the rules.

This new theory of language represented a radical departure from the more positivistically inclined picture theory. More than anything else it paved the way for post-analytical and post-structuralist approaches to language which contributed to some of the perspectivist ideas characteristic of post-modernity. Language in ordinary usage is incredibly varied. Human beings cause for themselves all kinds of puzzlements when they become over-impressed or over-reliant on particular language games, most notably that of the exact sciences. However, all use of language is legitimate once its purpose is made plain in the context in which it is employed. We do not even have to find common features to link together things called by the same name; family resemblances will suffice. Wittgenstein 'conceived his task to be to remind us of what lay on the surface, not to express any opinions or offer deep explanations.'[179]

Hermeneutics is another major contemporary tradition in the philosophy of language, associated with the thought of Gadamer, Ricoeur, Barthes and others. Gadamer built on Heidegger's phenomenology of being. Like Wittgenstein, he moved away from associating understanding too closely with the use of language in the exact sciences. He recognised that, by privileging scientific terminology as a standard for arriving at meaning, the attempt was being made to free the human subject from the contingent and circumstantial nature of being in the world. The result was the reification of nature, the attempt to stand outside history and isolate the reflecting subject from the vicissitudes of immersion in specific contexts. In contrast, Gadamer believes that understanding can only be achieved by overcoming the subject-object dichotomy through the merging of the horizons of the interpreter and the text.[180] Texts always supply a surplus of meaning, not necessarily circumscribed by the author's intent. 'It is this all-encompassing horizon of language and meaning, rather than the author's intentions, which ultimately determines meaning. Language speaks through individual subjects as much as they speak through language.'[181]

The recognition of the contextual nature of the pursuit of knowledge in language and past history led Gadamer to question an objectifying understanding of reason. If the reasoning person is irrevocably conditioned by his or her pre-judgements, conceptual commitments and prior intellectual frameworks, then reason may not be neatly set

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[179] J.O.Urmson and Jonathan Ree, *The Concise Encyclopedia of Western Philosophy and Philosophers* (London: Routledge, 1989), p. 330.

[180] Text is to be understood as a reference to 'all fields of human life and inquiry', *To Stake a Claim*, p. 10.

[181] *An Introduction to Continental Philosophy*, p. 112.

against tradition or even prejudice. A fresh ontology of knowing will emphasise the community dimension of understanding bounded by authority, custom and convention. Some have seen Gadamer's hermeneutical concerns as leading towards historicism with its denial of a transcendent critical perspective and its emphasis on a particularistic, descriptive and contemplative method rather than a search for universal, abstract and explanatory laws of human life. Thus, he has been criticised for articulating a philosophy, which could easily become compliant towards politically reactionary ideas and movements.

Contemporary moves in the philosophy of language, in an attempt to overcome the objective-subjective dichotomy, appear to have shifted decisively in the direction of the subjective. Attempts to locate understanding and meaning in the wider communal horizons of language-games and history may help to overcome individualism but give no necessary escape from subjectivism. This is born out in the post-structuralist development towards the 'deconstruction of linguistics.' Roland Barthes is a representative of the view that language has to be liberated from all fixed meanings. He believes that literature is a privileged medium of revolt, 'because it enables us to experience words not as simple instruments (as the scientific attitude dictates) but as…an infinitely playful performance of signification to be hedonistically savoured in all its pluri-dimensional richness. Literature, in short, reconverts knowledge into desire.'[182]

Questions of truth

If it is evident that one cannot know any fact or statement of belief unless one is assured of its truth-value, then apprehension of the truth becomes the most fundamental issue in epistemology. However, the very notion of truth has come under attack from two principle quarters. First, the definition of truth as conformity with what is has been disputed by different kinds of anti-realism. According to this latter view, verification of the truth of a statement about the real world is not possible, since the real world is not directly accessible to us. Contact with anything deemed in some way to be independent of us has to be mediated by thought-processes, using language, that are always already shaped by currently accepted theories and procedures.

There are a number of variations of this position. A game-theory approach states that truth is a matter of linguistic or discursive convention within a community. It is arrived at by a process of negotiation between two or more apparently incompatible representations of reality.[183] A Kuhnian theory of paradigm shifts in science affirms that scientific conclusions are always underdetermined by data and that, therefore, their 'truth' can be little more than their general acceptability within the scientific community. The choice to believe, he argues, is determined to a large extent by prevailing paradigms, rather than by strictly evaluated evidence conforming to an objective state of affairs: 'Objectivity consists, not in the correspondence of our theories to the world, but in the inter-subjective agreement about those theories

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[182] *Modern Movements*, p. 330.

[183] See, *Reclaiming Truth*, pp. 35-39.

among members of the scientific community based on their shared values. Kuhn identifies objectivity and rationality with a special sort of consensus, a consensus based on the values that make science what it is.'[184] A strong version of the sociology of science argues that the measure of true belief and rationality is determined by particular historical circumstances.[185] Criteria for the justification of scientific explanations are inescapably tied to the conditions of their discovery: 'What counts as scientific 'truth' – so the authors maintain – [186] is determined *neither* by the ways things stand in reality, *nor* by any special merit – any 'inherent' truth-related virtue – in those theories or procedures that happen to gain widespread communal assent. Rather, it is a product of the reception history (or the cultural pressures making for acceptance or rejection) to which all truth-claims are constantly exposed and which thus provide the ultimate court of appeal in matters of scientific 'fact'.[187]

Secondly, truth is said to be linked to structures of power in society. '"Knowledge" and "truth" are compliments paid to successful discourse, as Rorty and others have suggested'.[188] By this is meant a definition in terms of that sector of society that has managed to have its views accepted. Derrida, for example, seeks to undo the binary division in the history of philosophy in which, among other opposites, truth has been privileged over error. The problem with this way of thinking, he argues, is that it exalts a hierarchical model for knowledge which excludes difference and 'the other.' Thus truth becomes a repressive reality, a notion explored at some depth by Michel Foucault in his critique of the historical development of certain social institutions. Truth becomes assimilated to the consensus of the experts whose thought is always already expressive of some prior political or ideological commitment.[189]

The strong critique of the classical concept of truth,[190] with its emphasis on correspondence, the logic of antithesis and the excluded middle, a representative account of language and a robust realism, has given rise to a number of alternative theories.[191] In differing degrees each one presupposes an internal perspective from which criteria for truth can be elaborated. In reality, they are much more about clarifying the standards for measuring truth-claims than about the definition of truth itself. Thus, a pragmatic version highlights functionality as the primary criterion: beliefs that bring about desirable results are said to be truth-indicative. The performative theory, which maintains that truth-claims are veiled devices for asserting assent or dissent to propositions, is merely a way of describing a mechanism. Jurgen

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[184] *Philosophy of Science: The Central Issues* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1998), p. 227.

[185] See, Mary Hesse, *Revolutions and Reconstructions in the Philosophy of Science* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1980), pp. 31-33.

[186] Shapin and Schaffer, *Leviathan and the Air-Pump: Hobbes, Boyle and the experimental life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985).

[187] *Against Relativism*, p. 271.

[188] Bernd Magnus and Kathleen Higgins (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Nietzsche* (Cambridge: CUP, 1996), p. 6.

[189] See, Alan D. Schrift, 'Nietzsche's French legacy' in *The Cambridge Companion to Nietzsche*, pp. 338-340.

[190] William Alston in *A Realist Conception of Truth* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996) provides a robust response to the prolonged and fierce attack on the traditional view. Nicholas Wolterstorff comments on the book: 'the common dismissal of the correspondence theory of truth as outmoded has itself become outmoded.'

[191] They are set out in *To Stake a Claim*, pp. 30-34.

Habermas's consensus theory, which proposes that a truth-claim is an affirmation of validity whose legitimacy can be tested in an "ideal speech situation" (i.e. one in which all communication is completely free from ambivalence and misrepresentation) is a way of stipulating the conditions necessary for a claim to truth to be justified. Understood as means for distinguishing between truth and error, some of these theories have merit. However, the correspondence theory is the only one that deals with the nature of truth as such. Hence, it is the one that is most attacked by all those who wish to discredit the notion of truth altogether.

The missiological significance of the epistemological confusion

In a presentation of this nature there is always the risk of over-simplifying highly complex issues. For this reason, both the descriptive and analytical parts of this discussion will remain tentative and unfinished. However, the mission of the Christian community cannot remain static until and unless we are able to produce a near-perfect evaluation of contemporary culture. It is possible, I believe, to describe in a competent and fair way the main problems in the modern Western tradition of believing and knowing. It is also possible to deduce from this exploration some key conclusions, which become the context for mission, without ever having to produce an exhaustive and faultless account of the subject.

Our survey has concentrated on two pivotal and momentous radical breaks in epistemology in the West, which have become defining moments for the whole of subsequent thought. The first can be described as the shift from an integrated concept of knowledge, in which confidence in the trustworthiness of the Book of God as a true account of the place of humanity in the universe was balanced by confidence in the ability of human beings to discover the Works of God, to a dis-integrated account of knowledge in which the first strand was discredited and the second strand was exalted into the sole source of understanding. The result has been a clear division between knowledge revealed by the initiative of God and knowledge acquired through the enterprise of human reason without reference to God.[192] The second shift has been marked by the belief that all ideas in the fields of language, history and culture (and in some cases even science) are conditioned by and relative to particular perspectives. Previous claims to universal and absolute knowledge about the origin, nature and destiny of the universe and humanity are deconstructed into so many different and often incommensurable angles, stances and interpretations, none of which could assert any superior access to a (non-existent) category called truth.[193]

The first shift could be described as a transition from a modern view of reality, based on a committed and yet modest scientific outlook, still reverent towards the author of the natural world, to modernity as a view that the natural world is all the reality there is. The second shift denotes a transition to what might be called counter-modernity (not post-modernity, for that suggests the beginning of another creative stage of human intellectual endeavour, whereas the situation is one of dissolution and dispersal). The consequences of each shift have been immense. The general result is

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[192] It was not long before Nature supplanted creation as a description of the material world.

[193] The discussion that follows is developed at much greater length in *The Future of Reason.*

that many wish to abandon epistemology altogether as the search for justified true beliefs, replacing it with a thorough-going and enervating suspicion towards all norms, codes and the truth-regulating theories that support them and the exaltation of polycentric suppositions about the meaning and conduct of life.

It would be easy to write the history of the West over the last half millennium as if it were an uninterrupted progression from pre-modern ideas to those of modernity and counter-modernity, such that it appears predetermined and irreversible. If such an account were the only one available, the present dichotomy between knowledge of the objective world outside and the subjective, inner world would be prolonged and become established. Then humanity would be condemned to a totally fruitless search for an intrinsically unavailable, integrated understanding of the whole of reality. Then the story of Sisyphus would seem a good way of describing the utter frustration of a generation endued with enormous technical information, intellectual power and rational ingenuity unable to solve the most fundamental questions of existence.

For the time being, the epistemological dilemma of the West remains unresolved and irresolvable, for the intellectual tools deemed by the majority to be the only ones available are inherently incapable of 'putting Humpty-Dumpty together again.' The failure to bring together the assumptions about reality necessary for the scientific enterprise to be possible[194] with a comprehensive explanation of human beings' experience of being human is the context for mission in the West. Prior to thinking about missiological responses, we need to feel deeply the effects of the situation we are part of.

Contemporary, mainstream thought in the West assumes a naturalistic interpretation of life. Some form of evolution of all species from a common beginning through mutation, natural selection and the survival of the fittest is taken for granted as the explanation for life on earth. Modern rationality has deemed intelligent design either impossible or implausible, so that the universe as we know it is the result of blind chance (through the replication of selfish genes) and has no explanation beyond the bare fact of being what it is.[195] The consequence of naturalism is that we can do no more than accept the way things appear to be and endeavour to understand how they function: beyond an empiricist account of the observable world everything is speculation. Needless to say, within this perspective the uniquely human notions of purpose, beauty, conscience, consciousness, language and imagination cannot be elucidated. This prompts a number of writers to produce what can only be called a 'projection theory' of moral and aesthetic judgement: even though neither has any objective existence, we have created both in order that we might live more humanly. We can only live *as if* they reflected a reality independent of our subjective musings.[196]

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[194] Roger Trigg argues effectively that science cannot find within its own assumptions those necessary for its conclusions to be validated; its methods are predicated on premises that cannot be corroborated by these methods; see, *Rationality and Science.*

[195] According to Richard Dawkins, 'Bernard Shaw said that when you contemplate Darwinism your heart sinks into a heap of sand within you,' Andrew Pyle (ed.), *Key Philosophers in Conversation: The Cogito Interviews* (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 73.

[196] See, for example, the attempt by Mary Midgley to give a coherent account of the origin of ethics from within a naturalistic evolutionary framework, *A Companion to Ethics*, pp. 3-13. Michael Ruse, 'The Significance of Evolution' in *A Companion to Ethics*, pp. 500-510 is honest, though also extremely cynical, in his evaluation

Such an outcome of a consistently naturalist view of life, when compared with the projection theory of the existence of God, is a fascinating case of *et tu, Brutus!* As we have no rational means of escaping from the imprisonment of our own *cogito,* in order to account for the foundations of life that are necessary for us to flourish properly as human beings, we have to fabricate illusions. It is hard to imagine a more devastating critique of the inadequacies of rationalism and empiricism than this attempt to invent a reality in order to escape from the possibility that nothing is real.[197]

The post-modern breakdown of the rationalist/empiricist consensus leads to a further dimension of unreality. In one sense, post-modern consciousness utilises the Hegelian method of the negation of the negation.[198] The original negation, practiced by modernity, was, as we have seen, the refusal to countenance any source of knowledge beyond the empirical or the axiomatic. The second negation is tantamount to a repudiation of knowledge as justified true belief. Truth is regarded by post-modern thought as a mistaken category for it appears always to assimilate all differences to the same, thus violating the minority voice and exotic conduct. Truth-claims ignore the contextuality of all perspectives: the impossibility of stepping outside nature, history or culture means that all assertions are merely one of many interpretations of multi-faceted existence from an incontestably relative viewpoint. Thus, the principle that all non-empirical claims to know can only have the status of opinions is now extended to all claims. The 'text' is no longer authoritative in the sense that the reader 'is given' a univocal exposition of its purport. The meaning is not to be sought 'behind' the text, in the intention of the author (in the case of the Book of Nature, God), but 'before' the text in an endless signification made possible by the fantasy of human imagination.[199]

An attentive reading of the contemporary state of epistemology, as a result of the changes and disputes of the past three hundred years, will show that it presents a number of immense challenges to the thinking and practice of Christian mission. First, we might note the difficulty of proclaiming what purports to be the word of God in a world that distrusts words because of the way they have been used to create oppressive ideologies and manipulate beliefs. Christian preaching has to overcome

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of the place of ethics in an evolved world: ' Morality remains without foundation…Why does such a thesis…seem so intuitively implausible? Why does it seem…so ridiculous to argue that morality is no more than an illusion of the genes?…The simple fact is that if we recognised morality to be no more than an epiphenomenon of our biology, we would cease to believe in it and stop acting upon it…What this means is that, even though morality may not be objective in the sense of referring to something 'out there', it is an important part of our experience of morality that we think it is,' pp. 507-8. Anthony O'Hear, *Beyond Evolution*, on the other hand, concludes that 'Darwinism, if applied to our forms of intellectual, moral and aesthetic life, is indeed a dangerous idea' (p. 214). Yet, with regard to aesthetics, he says, 'Aesthetic experience seems to produce the harmony between us and the world that would have to point to a religious resolution were it not to be an illusion. But such a resolution is intellectually unsustainable, so aesthetic experience, however powerful, remains subjective and, in its full articulation, illusory,' p. 201.

[197] For an extended critique of naturalism as a self-refuting theory, see, *Rationality and Science*, pp. 80-92.

[198] See, Tom Bottomore, *A Dictionary of Marxist Thought* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), p. 400.

[199] Commenting on Derrida's method, Anthony Thiselton says, 'Meaning is always postponed, in the sense that new meanings constantly overtake it as new interests and new cultural frames repeatedly change its multi-level currencies', *Interpreting God and the Postmodern Self: On Meaning, Manipulation and Promise* (Edinburgh: T and T Clarke, 1995), p. 15.

the near instantaneous suspicion that its affirmations are mere propaganda. Related to this, secondly, is the observation that, if God has spoken, his communication is only available in the time-bound, humanly fallible medium of linguistic expression open to multiple interpretations. Moreover, to accept that only one particular *ethnos* is the privileged recipient of this communication is gratuitously 'racist' in a world made aware of the positive value of multi-ethnicity.[200]

Thirdly, the task of making sense of a divine reality in an age that has 'taken leave of God' is massive. The present age is scarcely interested in debating the possibility of the existence of God. So, it may be futile for Christians even to begin to deal with objections to classical theistic proofs, or with sceptical arguments based on the problem of evil, or with the supposedly egalitarian notion that truth resides somehow in all religions, or with the dismissive pronouncement that God is no longer an indispensable hypothesis for morality or personal meaning.[201] The legacy we have inherited from Nietzsche is that God is not just improbable but incredible. The 'death' of God does not arise from the normal atheistic refusal of theistic demonstration, but is the consequence of the shattering of all illusions and the dis-appearance of all fixed points. If modernity brought the 'disenchantment of the world', Nietzsche has brought its elimination in the form conceived by the Hebrew-Hellenistic synthesis. His thought gives rise to the 'birth of tragedy' alongside the self-confidence of scientific humanism. He begins to exalt the Dionysian principle of 'frenzy, excess and the collapse of boundaries' over the Apollonian principle of 'order, static beauty and clear boundaries.'[202] For if God is no more, then there can be (and must be) a transmutation of all values. It is not surprising, perhaps, that the apparently confident proclamation that God is dead was actually made by a madman.[203] Nietzsche adds the ironic comment that the scientific atheists who heard the announcement merely laughed and mocked.

Following on from the 'assassination' of God comes the death of self. In his *Twilight of the Idols*, Nietzsche affirms that 'we have done away with the true world: what world is left over? The apparent one, maybe?...But no! Along with the true world, we have done away with the apparent!' Ian Markam comments, 'Nietzsche understood completely that everything is at stake once one understands that theism is false.'[204] But this is an absolutely logical conclusion, once the search for a stable account of reality is undermined by the constantly subjective perspective from which all things are viewed. Christian mission in the West can only be undertaken now in the context of the death of God, the metamorphosis of all values and the loss of the centre of being. In the dialectical march of history (or, as Nietzsche would affirm, its eternal

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[200] See, Philip Clayton, 'Missiology between Monologue and Cacophany' in *To Stake a Claim*, p. 80.

[201] Nevertheless, Ian Markham, *Truth and the Reality of God: An Essay in Natural Theology* (Edinburgh: T and T Clarke, 1998), argues enterprisingly that justified rationality depends on the existence of God. Using a mode of argument that I shall endorse myself later, he contends that refusal to acknowledge an intelligent creator leaves all other traditions either incomplete, for not having uncovered properly their epistemological assumptions, or incoherent.

[202] See, *The Cambridge Companion to Nietzsche*, op. cit., p. 22.

[203] *The Gay Science*. Translated by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1974), Part III, section 125.

[204] *Truth and the Reality of God*, p. 115. The madman finishes with the words, 'must we ourselves not become gods simply to appear worthy of it? There has never been a greater deed...'

recurrence the), the Apollonian principle of system and organisation in the 'globalised' world economic and political order is in tension (or conflict) with the Dionysian principle of individual hedonistic self-gratification.[205]

Engaging missiologically the predicament

If the above account is anything like accurate, what response can be given from within a Christian account of life? Assuming that it is illegitimate either to reject all the main cultural paradigms out of hand, attempt to withdraw into a fideistic self-referring world,[206] or adapt the Christian faith wholesale to contemporary forms of believing and acting, what is the way forward? My belief is that Christians have to work at producing a more convincing epistemological model than the ones on offer today. My view is that this can only be done by retrieving an account of knowledge, which brings together once again the Word of God and the Works of God into a consistent explanation of the whole of reality.

For such an enterprise to be credible as a mission strategy for the Christian community in the West, it will be necessary first to overcome a whole series of intellectual prejudices against faith as an epistemic requirement for any worthwhile knowledge to be possible.[207] Secondly, it will be necessary to establish that there is no other way of overcoming the damaging rift between subject and object, which is the most notable outcome of modern cognitive assumptions, and thus restoring humanity once again to its proper place in the cosmos.

This will entail an immense intellectual effort, for the mood of the West is not conducive to listening to what many now consider to be an alien voice – can anything good come out of Nazareth? There is almost a prior task to be done of persuading Western men and women that Christianity does not belong only to the past. This is not solely, nor primarily, a research project but a commitment by the community to more consistent and percipient ways of living the Gospel in an inevitably alien territory, so that the discipleship principles of Jesus may be seen to be more productive of authentic human life than those of either Apollo or Dionysus.

However, the intellectual task is also a vital part of contemporary Christian mission. Christian theology, in so far as it accepts a missiological responsibility, will necessarily have to engage in the discourse of apologetics, meaning by this both dialogue and

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[205] Powerfully portrayed by Zygmunt Bauman in *Work, Consumerism and the New Poor* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1998). His comment that consumers are guided by aesthetic interests rather than ethical norms (p.31) echoes Nietzsche.

[206] By fideism I understand an epistemic stance in which fundamental Christian beliefs are deemed to have their own self-confirming justification and other sets of beliefs are considered largely incommensurable. It is not of consequence to fideists that their beliefs do not relate directly to a universal epistemic discourse, for knowing is said to depend on the adoption of a prior faith commitment which has its own warrant.

[207] Juan Luis Segundo, in *Faith and Ideologies*, calls it 'anthropological faith,' meaning the mechanism by which human beings place in hierarchical order their values, arriving ultimately at one to which they subordinate all the rest; see, p. 25. Knowledge is dependent on a prior acceptance that reality exists in a particular way: to attempt a purely empirical description begs several questions, and involves circular reasoning. In this sense, ontology precedes epistemology, and Descartes famous aphorism is reversed: *I am, therefore I think*. Our only access to the ultimate nature of reality is through belief that it is such and such. However, in distinction from 'fideism,' belief has to be credibly based on evidence and virtuous reasoning practices; it is not indiscriminate faith.

testimony, both genuine listening and speaking. It will need to seek out the appropriate contemporary equivalents of the market-place and the Areopagus (Acts 17: 17, 19), in order to test out its claims in the current global supermarket of beliefs. Against the prevailing trend it will resolutely and boldly, but non-aggressively, present its conviction that the Gospel gives the only comprehensively true interpretation of life, and that therefore all others are to a greater or lesser extent defective. It will expect that its views will be contested, for both rational and non-rational reasons, for according to its own message the human intellect is constantly affected by choices, made by the will, which subvert attempts to produce a comprehensive rationality. A perverted will is always likely to defend cognitively incoherent positions.[208]

By way of an exploratory project, my own research and thinking has caused me to believe that one of the most fruitful approaches to the epistemological predicament of the West is to adopt the heuristic method known as 'inference to the best explanation.' This states that, given a particular piece of evidence E and several different hypotheses, H, H1, H2, etc., designed to give an explanation of E, we should infer H rather than the alternatives if it provides the most convincing explanation of the phenomenon E.[209] As a missiological project, this means that Christians argue for the truth of the Christian faith on the basis that, of all possible explanations of our experience of the universe, whether religious or secular, it gives the most comprehensive and consistent account. Michael Banner, who expounds the approach in some detail, states that a theory's explanatory power is measured by observational success in accounting for known data and in suggesting new and corroborated observations. It has greater explanatory success over a wider range of phenomena than any of its rivals and can even account for all alternative explanations.[210] The advantage of adopting this model is that one has to take seriously both universally available evidence and proven categories of rational argument. This means that the explanations put forward are not private and esoteric intuitions or intimate, personal mysteries. Thus, truth-claims are related to experience of the world, self-awareness and the universal concourse of traditions and ideas in an open exchange of views.

In terms of the discussion of epistemology, the following elements seem to be implied. In the first place, a moderate foundationalism, supported by a robust realism,[211] is essential to provide a coherent framework for the theory to function properly. The foundation is that the existence of the God revealed in Jesus Christ

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[208] More theological reflection needs to be done on the effects of sin on human reasoning. Unfortunately, there is still a divide between Catholic and Reformed positions, which became entrenched in a polemical atmosphere. Perhaps, there is some hope of closer agreement in the current willingness to discuss differences; see, Linda Zagzebski, 'Religious Knowledge and the Virtues of the Mind' in *Rational Faith*, pp. 206-207.

[209] See, *Inference to the Best Explanation*; *Philosophy of Science*, pp. 1075-1076; *The Blackwell Guide to Epistemology*, pp. 48-49, 77-78.

[210] Michael Banner, *The Justification of Science and the Rationality of Religious Belief* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), p. 132.

[211] There is not space to discuss adequately the concept of critical realism as an approach to knowing. I agree broadly with Roger Trigg's hesitations about the way the idea is used in both science and theology; see, *Rationality and Religion*, pp. 84-87. The concept sounds modest, self-critical and self-correcting. However, as often employed, it is ambiguous and ultimately not very resistant to a creeping scepticism.

affords the best possible explanation for the whole of reality as we experience it.[212] It is foundational in the sense that it is basic and, as a premise, does not need further beliefs to justify it. It is moderate, in being fallibilist: i.e., open to refutation, not being immediately self-evident or immune from the need to provide reasons in open debate.

In the second place, the method is both faith-explicit and yet not enclosed in its own web of tradition.[213] Very specifically, it claims to be commensurable with other possible hypotheses, explanatory of some of the evidence, in that it is rationally consistent and evidentialist.[214] Therefore, in principle, there are criteria held in common for deciding between competing explanations. In the last analysis, a Christian moderate foundationalism would claim that not all alternatives are either equally consistent internally or able to give as comprehensive a clarification of reality in its widest extension. Here, it is necessary to clarify that evidence is not used in the model to justify a foundational belief, but to supply supporting testimony; otherwise, evidentialism could be taken as contradicting foundationalism.

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[212] The conclusion has to be that foundationalism, carefully defined, has not been defeated by its alleged problems. It is surprising, in the light of the vigorous defence of some form of foundationalism by leading contemporary philosophers (*The Structure of Justification*, Chisholm, 'The Myth of the Given' in *Epistemology: An Anthology*, pp. 107-119) that some theologians can speak so confidently of living in a post-foundationalist age; see, *Beyond Foundationalism* and *Essays in Postfoundationalist Theology*. I wonder, for example, whether it has escaped their notice that Laurence Bonjour, once a doughty critic of foundationalism and defender of coherentism, has recently switched sides; see his 'Can Empirical Knowledge have a Foundation?' in *American Philosophical* Quarterly 15.1 (1978), pp. 1-13; 'The Elements of Coherentism' in *Epistemology: The Big Questions*, pp. 210-231, where he defends coherentism, and 'The Dialectic of Foundationalism and Coherentism' in *The Blackwell Guide to Epistemology*, pp. 117-142, where he says,' my conclusion for the moment is twofold: (1) coherentism is pretty obviously untenable, indeed hopeless; and (2) a very traditional version of experiential foundationalism can be successfully defended against the most immediate and telling objection…', p. 139. He elaborates his revised position in a highly technical study, *In Defense of Pure Reason* (Cambridge: CUP, 1998), *passim*.

[213] It is not possible to discuss here whether it is compatible with Susan Haack's 'foundherentism;' see her *Manifesto of a Passionate Moderate*, pp. 85-86, 143-144, Polanyi's theory of personal knowing and tacit believing or Linda Zagzebski's virtue epistemology, c.f. 'Virtues of the Mind' in Sosa and Kim, *op. cit.*, pp. 457-467. However, I suspect that what differences there are may not be crucial. It is not, however, congruent with the 'Reformed' epistemology of Plantinga, Wolterstorff and Mavrodes which appears to reject foundationalisms of all colours and replaces them with an epistemology of properly warranted basic beliefs and cognitive proper functioning, c.f. Plantinga, 'Warrant: A First Approximation' in *Epistemology*, pp. 445-456, Nicholas Wolterstorff, 'Epistemology of Religion' in *The Blackwell Guide to Epistemology*, pp. 312-317. There is not space to discuss adequately this account of epistemic validity. Suffice to say, that, in my opinion, Reformed epistemology substitutes the notion of 'entitlement' for that of justification, because of its fear of the Lockean, Enlightenement form of evidentialism, which makes belief in God dependent on more fundamental beliefs. In this sense, the notion of warrant is actually anti-foundationalist. My position is foundationalist, in acknowledging the necessity of evidence, but moderate, in seeing evidence as a tool not a master. There is room for the further clarification of the use of hotly disputed terminology: for an extended review of Reformed epistemology; see, *Rationality and* Religion, pp. 113-132.

[214] Evidentialism is the view that a belief is justified if and only if there is sufficient evidence for it. Evidence may be interpreted widely, as would be the case in a legal judgement, coming in the form of eye-witness testimony, reliable memory, sense perception, other beliefs, supporting statements and integrity of character. The analogy with the procedures of a law-court is illuminating in that, in order to be creditable, evidence must be able to withstand rigorous cross-questioning. Sufficient evidence is that which satisfies 'all reasonable doubt.' Evidentialism rules out any approach to knowledge that relies on the self-justification of beliefs.

In the third place, it is able to do justice epistemically to both a common-sense account of knowing and the most sophisticated scientific theories. We touch reality because it is there in ordinary, everyday experience and in the work of scientific discovery.[215] It is there, because it has been put there in the act of personal divine creation and recreation. We also know it is there because of the consequences of denying its reality.

Fourthly and finally it brings together belief and action in the process of establishing the truth. Kevin Vanhoozer has developed an epistemology in a Christian perspective which combines testimony, interpretation and endurance as a means of demonstrating, not only the intellectual advantage that a Christian account of the universe holds, but also the pre-eminence of Christian living as a witness to the consistency possible between belief-systems and practice. In a presentation on epistemology in a missiological context his words ring true:

> 'The vocation of the Christian theologian is to be an interpreter-martyr: a truth-teller, a truth-doer, a truth-sufferer. Truth requires evangelical passion, not postmodern passivity; personal appropriation, not calculation. The theologian is to embody in his or her own person the core of Christian culture, in order to provide a focus for Christian wisdom.
>
> Making Christian truth claims ultimately is not a crusade, nor a pilgrimage, nor even a missionary journey, but rather a *martyrological* act. Genuine theology is not only about the art of reasoning well (rationality), but about living well (wisdom) and dying well (martyrdom).'[216]

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[215] The combination of the two is attested by a remark, attributed to Richard Dawkins, that he did not know anyone who would not be a realist flying at 30,000 feet! See, Christopher Norris, 'But will it fly? Aerodynamics as a Test Case for Anti-Realism' in *Against Relativism*, pp. 248ff.

[216] 'The Trials of Truth: Mission, Martyrdom, and the Epistemology of the Cross' in *To Stake a Claim*, p. 156. This vocation is, of course, required of all Christians not just those formally trained in the theological disciplines.

CHRISTIAN MISSION IN MULTI-FAITH SITUATIONS[217]

Setting the scene

My focus in this presentation will be on the situation in Western Europe. Undoubtedly, this part of the continent of Europe is multi-faith from an empirical point of view: there just are many people who practice the rites, rituals and ethical values of what John Hick has called the 'post-axial' religions. It is an interesting and important new phenomenon of the last fifty years. It is a new factor for Christian mission to wrestle with. However, I wish to argue that in the context of West European culture and society it is a relatively minor feature of everyday reality. The decisive datum is the tacit acceptance of a secular worldview and life form by the overwhelming majority of the inhabitants of this part of the world. If this is the case, the main challenge to Christian mission in this situation has to be contemporary secularity and secularism.

My second thesis is that, within this context, inter-religious dialogue, conceived as a conversation about beliefs and actions from a consciously religious point of view, easily becomes a major distraction. I am not wishing to suggest that inter-religious dialogue is irrelevant *per se*. There will be times and places where it may be important. However, in the context of the secularising process as the major characteristic of recent Western history, it has to be a discussion that follows a debate with a basically irreligious culture.

I am arguing that in the Western world there is a missiological presumption in favour of engaging first with a reality shaped by secular assumptions. In part this is due to one of the paradoxes of a secular world-view, namely that it is quite compatible with religious experimentation. Indeed, it is quite possible that, whilst religious interest is expanding, secular values are also increasing. From a missiological point of view, therefore, in the West the dialogue between Christian discourse and secular assumptions and lifestyles seems, *prima facie,* more important than inter-religious dialogue.

Defining mission

By mission I mean the imperative laid upon the Christian community to communicate, through life and words, the transforming good news of Jesus Christ as set forth in the apostolic testimony of the New Testament. I assume that such a task is fundamental to the community's self-definition. For Christian faith the story of Jesus, the Messiah, together with the interpretation of it given by specially appointed messengers (apostles), forms the basis for both explaining and transforming the world. It claims to give an accurate account of ultimate reality, seen and unseen, and thus a true explanation of human life in the universe.

Given that an interpreted story is at the heart of the Christian faith and given that the message implied within it makes a claim to ultimate truth, it has to be related to all other stories. As those engaged in conversation with people of different faith

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[217] Viggo Mortensen (ed.), *Theology and the Religions: A Dialogue* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), pp. 153-163.

traditions have correctly concluded, this entails debate[218] with the many stories of religious belief systems. However, in the West, during the last half millennium, the major enduring story has been the gradual emancipation of human thought and life from any religious sphere. The major missiological task of Christianity in this context, therefore, has to be to engage with this particular story. Otherwise, its mission will be fundamentally decontextualised and, consequently, flawed.

Interpreting the meaning of secular

This leads us to make an attempt to understand the secular nature of the contemporary environment of the West (and many other parts of the world increasingly influenced by Western secular assumptions and ways of living). This is, of course, a mammoth task that can only be undertaken here in a very preliminary way. I will try to lay out the main features of the secular map. It will inevitably be small scale in the sense that many of the details will not be visible, as would be possible in a major survey. I will start from the premise that the secular experience has, at least, the following dimensions: religious, philosophical, social, economic and psychological.

The Secular and Religion

One of the favourite ways of describing secularity has been by the use of the word *loss*. A secular world is one in which the unifying force of religious symbols and rituals (as in the Christian year) has disappeared. This symbolism has been called the 'sacred canopy,' an overarching structure that gives fundamental significance to life. A kind of deconversion experience has taken place by which over several centuries religious beliefs have become marginal to life, where to be irreligious is to be normal, where religious beliefs, where they do exist, have been relocated from the public world to the private, inner experience of the divine or sacred. Holy days, when the sacred (and 'secular') reality of the Saviour of the world has been celebrated, have become holidays (celebrations of the secular values of rest and relaxation). Opportunities for the healing of the spirit have been transmuted into the recuperation of body, mind and emotions.

In place of the transcendent, people are focused on the mundane, empirical and functional. Existence is experienced as one-dimensional. Religious belief is explained by one or another projection theory, i.e. that the divine has been created as a remedy for fear of the unknown, as compensation for an alienated existence or as a way of coping with loss of childhood.[219] Meanwhile, moral ideas of good and evil, right and wrong, are disconnected from the demands of a personal God and seen to rest on the foundation either of natural rights, evolutionary advantage or utility. Above all, quality of life is seen not to depend on meeting one's presumed spiritual needs through institutionalised religious means.

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[218] A better translation than dialogue of the etymological original, *dialogizomai*.

[219] Although these explanations belong respectively to Durkheim, Marx and Freud, written 100 to 150 years ago, they still have force as accounts of the reasons for the growth of what is vaguely called "spirituality" in recent years.

The Secular and Philosophy

Human beings become self-contained in the universe. They no longer accept any reality beyond their own experience of the world. They no longer need to gain knowledge from outside of their own reason to understand the origin, meaning and purpose of life. They are the measure of all things, the only beings in the universe with a mind. They are independent earthly beings, no longer exiled from Paradise (i.e. fallen humanity is normal humanity).[220]

Nevertheless, secular people are driven by a radical scepticism about the possibility of knowing anything. The beginning of wisdom is systematic doubt. Scepticism can only be limited by an appeal to empirical evidence. Knowledge is that which remains when claims about reality can be upheld against refutation by universally valid criteria. Moreover, against medieval asceticism, they have discovered pleasure as the goal of existence. The desires of the body may and should be satiated, as they belong wholly to the individual, have no sacred significance and one day will disintegrate into oblivion.

Secular, humanist people are protean;[221] they are confined by no bounds. There is no given form to life, no divine agency, no cosmic laws. They do not possess, therefore, any inherent being. They are entirely what they become through their own trans-forming action, particularly on nature as an object to be used and moulded to satisfy their desires. Humans are 'species being' (Marx), defined in terms of economic relationships within the collective whole of humanity. They are the result of an impersonal process of selection (Darwin), a chance occurrence that just happened to happen during the evolution of matter. They have killed off God and obliterated all horizons (Nietzsche) and, henceforth, there are no limits set from above to what is permitted to them.

The Secular and the Social Environment

Perhaps, the most important characteristic of all is the claim to an inviolate right to freedom. There is a revolt against hierarchy, elitism and the dead hand of the past; against all self-styled guardians of the truth and moral rectitude who determine what is in my best interests and force me to comply. A secular consciousness is one which is experienced as enlightenment, as the discovery (*my* discovery) of the destiny of being – briefly summed up in the immortal words, 'the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.'

Given that the individual is autonomous and inviolate, he or she has the right (but also the awesome responsibility) to decide what worldview and lifestyle are worth choosing. Hence, political life is founded on the basic idea of the contract in which individual rights are respected and upheld. The legal system is designed to regulate potential and actual conflict between sovereign and equal individuals. The ideal is a minimalist set of laws, in order to allow for a maximum amount of toleration of the

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[220] See, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Religion and the Order of Nature* (Oxford: OUP, 1996), chapter 5; 'The Tragic Consequences of Humanism in the West', pp. 163-190.

[221] From the mythical Greek god, Proteus, said to be able to change himself into any number of different forms.

views and practices of others, as long as there is a consensus in society that they do no harm to third parties.

The Secular and Economic Life

The role of government is to allow and encourage the greatest possible amount of space for people to make their own economic decisions. This means, *inter alia,* enabling an entrepreneurial spirit and refraining from interference in the natural workings of the market which are, by means of an 'invisible hand', able to work for the mutual benefit of all. Redistribution of wealth is always coercive. It is only legitimate, when the population as a whole freely agrees to forego one liberty (i.e. the right to enjoy the fruit of one's own labour) for the sake of another (i.e. the right to be protected in times of adversity).

The Secular and the Psyche

In one sense, the contemporary Western individual is an existentialist at heart: the freedom to choose what one wants to be in the face of the threat of meaninglessness is the only valid end for human beings. To be is to choose to create one's life in a particular way. Where the meaning of life is concerned, all ontologies, claiming any absolute validity through time, are dead. Because truth itself is socially produced, plural, historically contingent and changing, we no longer choose within a fixed reality, we choose to construct our own reality.

At least two major consequences flow from these beliefs. First, human community dissolves into fragmented bits and pieces. As has colourfully been said, an abandonment of common beliefs leads to a situation akin to the blind describing a sunset to the deaf. Secondly, it cannot matter what we choose, as long as our choice is serious and pursued with full conviction and commitment (as in sexual preferences). It is not important whether we choose something without any particular reason or purpose, as long as it feels good to us and doesn't appear to have any harmful consequences for other people.

It is a curious paradox, however, that, far from creating a sense of exhilaration, freedom often produces a sense of dread. It may be the dread of loneliness through the inability of sustaining solid, long-lasting relationships, or the terror of taking final responsibility for far-reaching decisions in one's own life. If freedom in a secular perspective necessarily entails freedom from signing up to any values which I have not decided myself, I have to opt for those which I find attractive. But, because they are entirely my choice, they have no real value for they cannot be shared with others on the basis of commonly inherited convictions. Both the logical and existential conclusion of secular independence from a God-given reality is that I (and my species) am alone in the world. And if a neo-Darwinian theory of natural selection through survival is believed as an explanation of human origins, this world is both impersonal and hostile.

The variety of beliefs with their practical consequences that have been enumerated under these five headings goes some way to providing a map of the secular consciousness so dominant in the self-assured culture of the West. It would be illusory to think that there could be any prospect of returning to a pre-secular society,

where a religious view of reality again shaped fundamental beliefs, moral sentiments and social customs. Some Christians and leaders of religious traditions give the impression that the combined forces of the world religions could perhaps turn back the relentless tide of secularism. Even if such an eventuality were possible, would it be desirable? I wish to give reasons why I think this would be a wholly mistaken strategy for Christian mission in a Western context.

The Secular challenge to Inter-religious dialogue

Given that inter-religious dialogue is now seen in some Christian quarters as the main component of mission, it is necessary to spell out the reasons why it is largely irrelevant to mission in a secular society. There are a number of interlocking arguments

The history of Europe

Secular society, being a peculiarly Western phenomenon, has come about largely as a set of responses to the previous Christian domination of Europe. In a paradoxical way, secularity is partly the consequence of the success of Christian inculturation. The danger of inter-religious dialogue is that it diminishes the missiological task by giving undue importance to a marginal reality within the European consciousness. Though the existence of people adhering to different religious traditions has greatly increased in Europe within the last fifty years, they still represent a very small minority of the population. Moreover, the particular beliefs, practices and even clothing of Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists seem to most Europeans exotic and alien. By and large, normal relations between indigenous Europeans and immigrants becomes possible in so far as the latter integrate into the secular culture of the former, i.e. that their beliefs and practices are kept to the private world of their own communities, and that they do not violate generally accepted liberal values.

Secular society has to be understood largely by placing it in juxtaposition with the development of Christendom. It is this particularity that alone can make sense of Western history and society as it has evolved in the last half millennium. Given the missiological challenge posed by secularity, concern with inter-religious relationships may well mask a failure of nerve and imagination to come to terms with a specific flow of history.

It seems self-evident, in any case, that dialogue cannot be fruitful unless each side has a firm sense of self-identity. In the case of Christian faith, one aspect of this will be its ability to evaluate self-critically and respond positively to the secular onslaught on its beliefs. In other words, it has to engage in a very serious dialogue with secular beliefs before it can meaningfully dialogue with other religions. Unless this prior dialogue substantially fashions the Christian encounter with the religious traditions of the world, the latter will take place in an unreal world. It will be decontextualised mission.

The secular as religious critique

Any understanding of inter-religious dialogue, which took it to imply a uniting of forces against a secularist worldview, would be a grave mistake. There are a number of aspects of the secular that rightly challenge religious people to reflect seriously on

their ways of thinking and acting and, where necessary, change. For example, there is no longer any place in any part of the world where the state should be upholding any particular religion, or requiring people to opt for a religion or interfering in cases of religious conversion. The exercise of political power under the dictates of a privileged religion is a corruption of both religion and politics. The secular interpretation of religion needs to be listened to, not dismissed, just because some parts of it are true.

The secularising tendencies of Christian faith

Part of the recovery of Christian identity, in its rediscovery of its missionary task in the West, is the acknowledgement that a proper understanding of a secular society is not incompatible with Christian faith. In so far as the chief characteristic of a secular society is the separation of political power from religious tests and ecclesiastical sanctions, the dissenting tradition within European churches eventually won the right of total non-discrimination. Professor Owen Chadwick in the Gifford Lectures bears this out:

> 'In Western Europe the ultimate claim of the liberal was religious. Liberal faith rested in origin upon the religious dissenter…Dissenters won a free right to express a religious opinion which was not the accepted or prevailing opinion.'[222]

In due time, the logic of dissent was extended to those who did not wish to confess any religious faith.

Within the last two hundred years, the majority of European Christians have come to acknowledge that the dissenting tradition is the one most faithful to the apostolic tradition. No-one today seeks to defend the model of Christendom, in which the Church was accorded special powers and privileges. Religious faith has to be a matter of individual conscience; the state has no place in the coercion of belief. The long Christendom phase of European history followed the 'Christ of culture' model, identified by Richard Niebuhr,[223] i.e. the identification of Christian faith with a particular political arrangement. Today, many Christians have rediscovered a more dialectical relationship between the Gospel and culture: Christ in paradoxical relationship to and transforming culture.

Christians in the West are able to recover a proper 'prophetic' distance from society and its political governance because the community of faith (the Church) is called to serve first the eschatological kingdom of God and, therefore, only critically the kingdoms of this world. It is well known that other faiths (particularly Islam) find it difficult to make such a sharp distinction between the people of faith and the political community. From its earliest years there has been a theocratic tendency within Islam. It is true that the majority of Muslims now live in nations without a Muslim majority, so they have had to come to terms with living within a system not ruled by Islamic principles. However, it may be said that the Islamic ideal is still a Muslim republic ruled according to *shar'ia* (the faultlessly revealed law of Allah), a notion too close to former Christian notions of the identity of the 'Christian' kingdoms of this world

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[222] *The Secularisation of the European Mind in the 19th Century* (Cambridge: CUP, 1985), pp. 26-27.

[223] *Christ and Culture.*

with the kingdom of God for comfort. Until and unless, people of other faith traditions come to accept without reservations the necessity of a fully secular state, inter-religious dialogue is severely compromised:

> 'One interpretation of Islam's modern predicament is that throughout its history it has been more a civilisation and an empire than a religion. But now that the empire has long since gone and the civilisation is in a state of turmoil, only the religious part is left. However, for Islam religion without a republic is like a body without clothes; it is exposed and vulnerable.'[224]

The missionary challenge to inter-religious dialogue

There is one final element in the argument; this concerns the ability of any faith tradition to undertake a meaningful dialogue with the secular humanist tradition. Here, I wish to argue that the Christian faith is in the best position to undertake such a task, even though it has struggled to adjust itself to the radical nature of the challenge. I also wish to argue that a defence of general religious sentiments is a hindrance to the task.

Such assertions may seem to be counter-intuitive. It would seem more plausible to argue that Christianity has manifestly failed to engage fruitfully with secular culture and, therefore, it is at least likely that other faith traditions could have more success. This line of reasoning is sometimes supported by the observation that a post-modern perspective has made possible the re-birth of interest in the spiritual dimension of life. A serious exploration of a reality beyond the material is now permitted as an intellectual option in the momentous critique of the positivist tradition in philosophy. In so far as post-modernity is willing to sanction only a pluralist approach to belief and values, those religious traditions which seem to favour an all-embracing approach to religious experience, namely those favouring a monistic philosophical explanation of life, would seem to be the most advantaged.[225]

The argument, then, that actual secular society is most conducive to those religious beliefs that have no difficulties in finding a way of including all beliefs within its understanding of the universe appears to be irresistible. It is not uncommon, therefore, to find even Christians embracing the pluralist thesis that all religious experience, including that associated with 'New Age' sentiments and with 'implicit religion,' is an expression of one ultimate 'Reality.'[226]

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[224] J. Andrew Kirk, *Loosing the Chains: Religion as Opium and Liberation* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1992), p. 83. See also, Ali Mazrui, *Cultural Forces in World Politics* (London: James Currey, 1990), pp. 15, 218; Bassam Tibi, *The Crisis of Modern Islam: A Pre-industrial Culture in the Scientific-Technological Age* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1988), pp. 45ff., 138-139; Hichem Djait, *Europe and Islam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), pp. 58-60; Shabbir Akhtar, *A Faith for All Seasons* (London: Bellew Publishing, 1990), pp. 15ff.

[225] The other side of this argument is the accusation that the Judeo-Christian tradition (now extended to the so-called Abrahamic faiths) with its tenacious and principled belief in only one God, is the main cause of all kinds of intolerance toward a diversity of beliefs and life-forms. Monotheism, it is argued, excludes (often violently) what is different.

[226] Due to the inherent difficulties in coming up with a precise understanding of what is encompassed by religious experience, it is not wholly implausible to argue also that even atheists may experience a sense of deep awe and wonder, akin to religious belief, at the transcendent nature of the universe (or, according to latest hypotheses, universes) as ultimately "Real".

The way forward for mission?

So far we have argued that the most critical context in which the contemporary mission of the Christian community has to be conceived is that of secular society. Although the secularising process is most obvious in the nations most influenced by European history, it is an increasingly global reality. In many ways it poses the most intractable problem for Christian witness globally. We have also argued that concentration on building relations of understanding with people of religious orientation, though not unimportant, may well be a dangerous distraction from the most pressing mission challenge of our times.

We may begin with the working hypothesis that secular belief comprises an identifiable set of convictions which more or less forms the everyday horizon of many people – those whom we may describe objectively as being irreligious, i.e., not being involved in any kind of regular cultic practices nor appealing to religious beliefs as reasons for their ambitions or behaviour. The missionary challenge is to bridge the apparently immense gap between the apostolic message of Jesus Christ – a meta-narrative which Christians cannot compromise, for it is the defining reality by which they live – and secular consciousness, and to learn how to live as a (missionary) minority in an irreligious age.

We have to take into account the assumption that, superficially, there seems to be less of a gap between Christian faith and the world religions than between the religions and secular beliefs. Added to the fact that secular culture itself seems to be an adversary which the religions have in common, it is not surprising that some Christians turn to inter-religious dialogue as the main stay of their missionary outlook. The gathering criticism of globalisation, seen as one of the children of a secular consciousness, and the move to find a religiously inspired 'global ethic' as a response, adds fuel to this approach. Nevertheless, I remain convinced that mission with regard to secular consciousness has both a historical and methodological priority over mission as interreligious encounter.

RELIGIOUS PLURALISM AS AN EPIPHENOMENON OF POST-MODERN PERSPECTIVISM[227]

The argument

My major interest in this paper is to demonstrate that religious pluralism as an interpretative theory of multi-religiosity is the consequence of an approach to knowledge known as 'perspectivism.' By religious pluralism, I mean any view of religious life and belief which asserts *either* that the most fundamental aspects of all (major) religious traditions are manifestations of the same 'ultimately Real' (the Hickian thesis) *or* that, though incommensurable, each religious tradition encompasses a path to salvation of equal worth and benefit. By perspectivism, I understand the epistemological thesis that there is no conception of reality independent of human interpretation and that all interpretations are inevitably contextually conditioned and contingent. Although it does not logically entail relativism, in that it does not explicitly deny that particular views can be true, it has usually employed a highly relativising technique towards all claims to knowledge.[228]

Perspectivism is associated with the philosophy of Nietzsche, who denied the existence of a single set of standards for determining the validity of specific truth claims. Nietzsche's perspectivism has been understood in two different ways. First it has been seen as his putative theory of knowledge. Because no accurate representation of the world, as it is, is possible, there is nothing unequivocally factual to which our theories correspond, in order to confirm them as true or false. Moreover, no method of understanding our world – no form of rationality or empirical procedure – enjoys a privileged epistemic status. Rather, our understanding is constituted by our desires and needs.[229]

This summary of Nietzsche's epistemic assumptions displays a frontal attack on most of the cherished beliefs of the Enlightenment. In the first place, it denies a correspondence theory of truth, namely that our perceptions of the world and the language we use to interpret and communicate them are accurate representations of what is really there. Secondly, it denies a transcendent reality which exists independently of our mental construction. In this sense, it borrows from Kant's anti-realist distinction between things-as they-are-in-themselves and things-as-they-appear-to-us. Thirdly, there is no particular foundation from which we may build an explanation of the world with confidence that it is correct. Finally, all our pretended knowledge is little more than an echo of our own place in the world. Knowledge is the consequence of power arrangements and is used to maintain relationships in favour of those who decide what is right to believe. According to this first interpretation of Nietzsche, it can readily be seen why he should be known as the 'father of post-modernity.'

However, owing to the self-referential contradiction of such a position – his own views, if taken perspectivally, are refuted – another interpretation has been argued by

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[227] Viggo Mortensen (ed.), *Theology and the Religions: A Dialogue* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), pp. 430-442.
[228] See, *A Companion to Epistemology*, pp. 304-5.
[229] See, Bernd Magnus and Kathleen Higgins, *The Cambridge Companion to Nietzsche* (Cambridge: CUP, 1996), p. 4.

some commentators. According to this understanding, Nietzsche is employing the genealogical technique of demonstrating that, historically, most, if not all, so-called facts have proved to be interpretations. In this way, beliefs once held to be unequivocally valid have been shown to be mere perspectives on life and the world, that have had to be either severely revised or abandoned altogether. Thus, knowledge is not something humans possess; such an idea continues the illusion of the philosophers that it is possible to reach the 'holy grail' of seeing things from God's point of view. In Nietzsche's perspective, claims to knowledge and truth are rhetorical devices which summarise successful discourse, i.e. arguments that happen to have persuaded most people.[230] Perspectivism is a deeply suspicious reaction to any view that we can have access to self-evident, assured knowledge about a reality independent of our preferences and aspirations.

Whichever interpretation is adopted, perspectivism is a fundamental characteristic of the outlook on the world known now so commonly as post-modernity. Before seeking to show how religious pluralist theses are one kind of manifestation of this perspectivism, we should show how this links to the post-modern state.

The marks of post-modernity

The End of Meta-narratives

In his celebrated book, *The Post-modern Condition*,[231] Francois Lyotard declares that no over-arching interpretation of history and life is any longer possible. One of the many problems, in his estimation, of the modern project has been the attempt to find a rational explanation for the development of human life. The most elaborate and complete attempt has been made by the Marxist account of human social life divided into stages according to the current economic means of production. Marx believed he had unlocked the clue to the past divisions within society and opened up the way to a conflict-free future by uncovering the dialectic of history – the class struggle. Once the economic contradictions of capitalism were negated, in the final death throes of private property arrangements, history would usher in a qualitatively different society: one in which all needs would be met as everyone contributed to the common good according to their abilities.

Marxism is one of the clearest examples of a meta-narrative. However, it is but one example of many attempts to harness the scientific method to different aspects of human life, in order to produce a complete explanation of a given set of phenomena. The Freudian analysis of psychological disorders would be another, in so far as it claims to give a comprehensive description of the mechanism of mental and psychic trauma. Durkheim's explication (in Elementary Forms of the Religious Life) of the causes of religious belief and practice in their origins in social cohesion and psychological integration is yet another.[232]

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[230] *The Cambridge Companion to Nietzsche*, pp. 5-6.

[231] *The Postmodern Condition*.

[232] Even Richard Rorty's neo-Darwinian pragmatism looks uncommonly like a theory claiming universal validity, in spite of his dislike of Platonist metaphysics; see, his 'The Challenge of Relativism', in *Debating the State of Philosophy*, pp. 31ff.

The post-modern objection to meta-narratives centres on the latter's bid to be all-inclusive descriptions of experience leading them to be exclusive of other ways of looking at life. They spring from the hubris of human reason which believes it can discover a final explanatory theory for everything. Post-modernity is a repudiation, if you like, of all attempts to arrive at the final (Hegelian) synthesis of history by exhaustively analysing all its component parts, with the intention of exposing fundamental social, economic, psychological or biological laws which can then be harnessed to plan a more fruitful future for humanity.

The impossibility of foundationalism

The drive towards meta-narratives has its origins in the dual desire to possess clear and precise descriptions of every human activity, using the scientific methodology so successfully employed with regard to the natural world, and to counter all forms of scepticism about the ability to arrive at true knowledge. In the Enlightenment view of things, knowledge was to have been the great emancipator, the way of liberating humanity from the darkness of ignorance, prejudice and superstition. By the light of reason, one would be able to forge a new society, built on the self-evidently superior values of equality and respect for the freedom and rights of all (meaning, at the time, all those able to own property).

Scepticism could only be defeated by discovering a set of foundational beliefs that could not be doubted or refuted. From the time of Rene Descartes onwards, many philosophers and scientists looked for a means of possessing an absolute certainty about certain convictions, of a kind that no amount of doubt could shake. Such convictions would have to be universally self-evident, beyond every kind of reasonable doubt. To disbelieve them would mean embracing irrationalism or remaining invincibly ignorant. Descartes, notoriously, sought to found such an indisputable belief on the thinking subject that simply could not deny its own existence without being self-contradictory. Other attempts were made by means of the conclusive demonstrations of scientific experimentation, said to lead to the conclusion that the entire workings of nature could be successfully deciphered, once the individual parts of the gigantic machine had been taken apart to reveal the way they function.

However, successive attacks against foundationalism were made by those who argued that one could only attain to absolute certainty by stepping outside the human condition completely and seeing things from 'God's-eye point of view,' that in reality all knowledge was dependent on prior theories and that such theories were, in turn, dependent on contingent historical factors. Even the most exact sciences, with the possible exception of mathematics, were always open to correction. From time to time, as Thomas Kuhn has argued, [233] science advances only by accepting fundamental 'paradigm shifts' that amount to radical departures from previously accepted norms. There is now a strong body of opinion which proclaims that all knowledge is the result of the interpretation of data from a relative perspective. It depends on the particular intellectual tradition to which we adhere.

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[233] *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions.*

The rejection of technological rationalism

A new interpretation of the history of the post-Enlightenment West comes to the conclusion that the potentially liberating force of reason has turned out to be oppressive and destructive. If Descartes believed that cogito ergo sum was an irrefutable truism, Enlightenment man (not so much woman) has acted as if the phrase *vinco ergo sum* (I conquer, therefore I am) was the new road to paradise. Modern man has conquered nature (in the name of utility), other people's territories and cultures (in the name of civilisation), markets (in the name of economic liberalisation and growth) and space (in the name of military superiority). All of these have been justified rationally by the benefits they will bring to all humanity. However, the resulting exploitation, destruction and obliteration of non-technical values have been either rationalised or explained away.

The main objection to technological rationalism lies in the assumption that the technocrats know what is right and best for the rest of humanity.[234] Foucault, for example, has explored the history of so-called deviancy and come to the conclusion that a social or political consensus, in matters like mental illness or sexual behaviour, is nothing more than the imposition by the powerful of their views upon the weak. He represents the post-modern tendency to repudiate clear and absolute distinctions, such as those between sanity and insanity, and to recognise and encourage difference, i.e. the right of all people to dissent from the current views of the majority.

The abandonment of all truth-claims

The post-modern understanding of historical development ends up in a powerful repudiation of all claims to know the truth. There are several dimensions to this powerful mistrust of all assertions to possess the truth.

The desire to dominate.

The post-modern consciousness includes a deep methodological scepticism that sees claims to truth as covert claims to power. In the real world, those who claim to know the truth, whether in scientific, moral or religious terms, have always wished to use their contentions as a means of controlling others. Far from 'the truth' making people free, it has everywhere had the opposite effect.

The commitment to pluralism and relativism.

Knowledge and understanding are always relative to a particular tradition. There is no way of being able to transcend the many traditions of interpretation that all claim a privileged perception of the meaning of life and what is right and good. Seeking to reach a definitive conclusion about correct beliefs and actions always leads to conflict and inhuman policies. Ultimately, a free society is one which allows the maximum liberty to individual consciousness to decide on moral convictions and lifestyles. Tolerance and openness to changing patterns of behaviour must be the supreme

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[234] One of the strongest critics of this form of rationalism, whilst remaining a critic of any post-modern alternative is Jurgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987).

values of contemporary society. The language of 'good', 'better', 'best' is discriminatory, repressive and undemocratic.

The new view of language.

Part of the rejection of foundationalism involves a crisis of representation in describing reality. It is said that no longer can we be sure that our language accurately depicts an external world. The claim that our mental images of reality exactly correspond with that reality is an unsafe assumption. The view that the world is a given is a myth. Human beings create their own world out of their imagination. Over against the so-called objectivity of reason (the alleged masculine principle), society must now re-capture the subjectivity of desire (the alleged feminine essence). The rigid distinction between subject and object cannot be trusted.

We now can do no more than construct our own reality using language according to the particular rules and regulations of our own game. Meaning is a creature of hermeneutics: when interpreting texts (and nature and history, along with literature, are textual forms), the reader may decide the meaning; there cannot be any restriction on its significance. Reality is transformed into images. There are no right or wrong ways of believing.

The death of 'god'

The proclamation by the madman, in Nietzsche's Gay Science, that 'modern civilisation' ("you and I") "have killed" God, "all of us are his murderers," is strikingly post-modern. It is not so much a claim that theism is intellectually indefensible, because it is either an unnecessary or impossible thesis (according to the rationalist canons of modernity), as an acknowledgement that any divine being impedes the full liberty of human aspirations. The death of God is the death of morality followed by the attempt to exalt aesthetics as the most supreme good for humanity. Henceforth, human beings are invited to throw of the shackles of conventions and reach out for a universe of their own creation.

Nietzsche's concept of deicide is complex and subtle. It is intimately linked to his declaration of the coming of the *Übermensch,* the 'will-to-power' and the 'eternal recurrence'. There are many interpretations. One of the most significant, perhaps, is that the death of 'god' actually spells the death of man. The *Übermensch* is the 'last man' in the modern sense of one who believes he is able to discover the path of bliss through uncovering and exploiting the reality of the world. Nietzsche represents an immense break with the modern project. However, his 'brave new world' is full of tragedy. As has been rightly said, Nietzsche, unlike many atheists, saw the full horror and immense sadness of this act of assassination, for it implied the 'super-human' task of recreating all values, something that Nietzsche was afraid humanity would prove incapable of doing. And, even if they set about the task, the absolute relativism of perspectives would make the task never-ending.

Nietzsche and those who wittingly or unwittingly have followed him have declared all historical projects built on the belief in truth surpassed. There is no comfort to be had by a belief in a supposed progressive unfolding of a rational spirit in the achievements of human endeavour. Nietzsche's account of the death of 'god' is nihilistic in

that it announces the end of contemporary 'renaissance' man, without any clear project as to what will follow. If the eternal recurrence is Nietzsche's final answer to the myth of progress, it is deeply pessimistic.

Religious pluralism as an epiphenomenon of post-modern perspectivism

A pluralistic explanation of religious life has to be understood in relation to alternative explanations. Even if it is increasingly accepted today that the three-fold classification of theoretical options into exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism is unsatisfactory, what is represented by the first two is philosophically and theologically antithetical to the presuppositions of the third position. Those who hold to an exclusive or inclusive view of salvation within the framework of Christian belief maintain that Jesus Christ is not just a unique way of salvation (corresponding to other unique ways in other religious traditions), but the one and only way. Moreover, they argue that he is the only way not just in the sense that he is the only way to the class of salvation that Christian faith proclaims, namely from sin as rebellion against and alienation from God, but that there is no other form of salvation which is achievable in any other religious tradition. The logic of this position is that salvation is the gift of the one and only true God and that, therefore, all other claims to salvation (or near equivalent such as liberation or enlightenment) are false and illusions.

Now this proposal breaks all the canons of post-modern perspectivism. In the first place, it claims an absolute position from which to give an account of the whole of reality. In the true theological sense, it holds to the possibility of knowing God's point of view on the grounds that God has made it known. It therefore rejects the hypothesis that all language about God is constructed from a merely human point of view.

Secondly, it affirms a transcendental realism,[235] namely that "the intransitive objects of knowledge are in general invariant to our knowledge of them: they are the real things and structures, mechanisms and processes, events and possibilities of the world; and for the most part they are quite independent of us."[236] In other words, it is of vital importance to the question of knowledge and truth that a fundamental distinction is maintained between a subject and an object. The object of belief is not merely a projection or interpretation of an inner experience or disposition to believe or the externalisation of an attitude, wish or imperative; rather it (he/she) has an independent and self-sufficient existence irrespective of whether believed in or not.

Thirdly, it maintains an absolute antithesis between two or more accounts of ultimate truth, wherever any one of them manifestly contradictory any other. Thus, it upholds the 'law of the excluded middle,'[237] thereby rendering incoherent all attempts to maintain that opposite truth claims (such as ultimate reality is both personal and

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[235] For the meaning and use of the term; see, Roy Bhaskar, 'Philosophy and Scientific Realism' in Margaret Archer (et al.) (eds.), *Critical Realism: Essential Readings* (London: Routledge, 1998), pp. 16-47.

[236] *Critical Realism*, p. 17.

[237] 'The law of the excluded middle…says that every instance of 'A or not-A' is true, where 'not-A' is the negation of 'A', A.C. Grayling, *Philosophy*, p. 81.

impersonal, or that one can experience ultimate salvation only through Christ, but also through Krishna) can both be valid.

A pluralist theory of religious experience could only be credible and convincing, if one accepts the premise that the notion of 'justified true belief' is a euphemism for belief which I am able to convince others is as equally well-grounded from my perspective as other beliefs are from the perspective of those who hold them. To put it another way, the only procedure by which any theory of religious experience can be justified, without entering into a circular argument, is that of arguing from within a particular tradition of discourse. Precisely because there is no tradition-transcending point of reference from which a normative account of the ultimate truth of assertions may be judged right or wrong, there is no possibility of preferring one interpretation to another without being self-referring. In epistemological terms, all forms of foundationalism are untenable, knowledge can only be based on a coherentist or pragmatist view of truth. Such a view, however, although it appears to be congenial to a pluralist theory of religions, in fact paradoxically contradicts the pluralists' conviction that their account of religious traditions is exempt from relative cultural conditioning, in that they *know* the ultimate secret which explains different religious manifestations.

Religious pluralism, in either of the two versions which I offered at the beginning, is closely related to the 'postmodern' theory that religious language (irrespective of the faith tradition in which it occurs) is a non-referring human construction, elaborated to give meaning to human experience. It rejects the possibility that any one faith could have an all-encompassing explanation which accounts for other faiths. It also effectively proclaims 'the death of God' in the sense of refusing the notion of an ontologically singular deity directly accessible to human cognition.[238] The word 'God' is transmuted into a cipher which carries whatever content a religious community wishes to invest it with. The 'death of God' is also the consequence of a radical cultural pluralism that holds that God is simply the geographically limited 'tribal' God of Western theism, who has historically 'passed away in that he/she is no longer acceptable in a pluri-centred cultural world.

Theories of religious pluralism are inextricably linked to the lines of argument that have come powerfully to the fore in post-modern consciousness, even though as Hick rightly maintains some of them precede modernity.[239] By the same token, they are as strong or weak as those arguments. Hence, if it can be shown that the post-modern outlook is essentially flawed, then, I would suggest, it can be established that

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[238] I have argued elsewhere that Hick's notion of an Ultimate Reality that transcends all categories, and every idea of a supreme being beyond all beings, being essentially unknowable in itself) the *via negativa* strategy leaves no alternatives), is simply a covert, if sophisticated, form of atheism; see, 'John Hick's Kantian Theory of Religious Pluralism and the Challenge of Secular Thinking' in *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue* I (2002). Wittgenstein perceptively and wittily, summed up the position in his aphorism (referring to the experience of pain), "a nothing would serve just as well as a something about which nothing could be said" (*Philosophical Investigations* (translated, G.E.M. Anscombe, 3rd. edition (Oxford: Blackwell, 1972), # 304.

[239] Hick, in a personal communication to the author. However, it is surely more than a coincidence that contemporary (Western) arguments for pluralism as the most satisfying account of religious diversity coincide chronologically with the articulation of post-modern thinking, i.e., from the late 1950s onward. Pluralism is only plausible in an intellectual climate in which the still essentially Christian view of the world expressed in modernity's acceptance of an objective reality and a universal rationality is repudiated.

religious pluralism is also untenable. This, I hope, will become convincing once one sees the strength of the case against post-modern thought, applying each piece of reasoning to claims made by the advocates of religious pluralism.

The inherent deficiencies of the post-modern outlook

The fundamental reason for speaking about the impossibility of a post-modern culture is its self-contradictory nature. For its own critical stance it is dependent on assumptions that are, in turn, undermined by its own critique. For example, although it wishes to dismiss claims to truth and absolutes as imperialist and oppressive, the critique has to assume that which it wishes to deny. First, the critique depends on an unarticulated normative framework of its own, when it condemns unjust and oppressive systems. Moreover, when it denounces universal systems in the interests of the emancipation of the local and the different, it implicitly assumes the universal right of all to be treated uniquely. Secondly, the tolerance that delights in distinctiveness cannot be tolerated for those who would suppress otherness. Like any perspective on human life, post-modernity is bound to limit tolerance in order to remain true to itself. Therefore, in practice it poses no radical break with an ethic of absoluteness, whatever it may claim to the contrary. Thirdly, post-modernity to be consistent to its own critique requires both an ethic of 'responsibility to act' and an ethic of 'responsibility to otherness.' A determined commitment to the deconstruction of values threatens to undermine, or at least enervate, this sense of responsibility.

Post-modern thought has dismissed the possibility of encountering truly objective reality. Involved in this argument is the implicit assumption that the claim to objectivity is false. However, to use the language of error is in itself a claim to a superior grasp of reality! Likewise, post-modern consciousness attacks the kind of rationality that has come to the fore as a consequence of the scientific spirit - logical, consistent, self-critical of its own premises, susceptible to evidence and demonstration. However, the only way to pursue a negative analysis of rationality is by using the same techniques of reason as those being dismissed. If the dismissal of meta-narratives is intended to cover all claims to possess true perspectives, it is itself a claim to enjoy the status of global validity.[240]

In so far as the contemporary self is but the passive product of language, history, culture and society, it cannot maintain a properly dissentient stance against history, culture and society, for such a stance is, according to the theory, already a mere product of the transient, ephemeral and mutable forces that happen to exist. It is not surprising then that, for example, few feminists are also consistent post-modernists. Feminism is a commitment to both an ideological critique which presupposes a

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[240] Likewise, inevitably, theories of religious pluralism have to become, in their endeavour to refute alternative theories, substitute meta-religions, which claim to transcend all perspectives by giving a "true" account of all religious phenomena. In the case of Hick it is not clear to what extent he is propounding a mere hypothesis and to what extent a demonstrable conclusion derived from reasoning about evidence. However, a mere hypothesis, unless substantiated by valid criteria, does not advance understanding; it remains no more than a piece of interesting speculation. It is clear that Hick is propounding a theory that he believes is "true". In contrast to non-realists like Don Cupitt, he stubbornly maintains he is a critical realist with regard to the transcendent; see, John Hick, 'Religious Realism and Non-Realism: Defining the Issue' in Joseph Runzo (ed.), *Is God Real?* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1993), pp. 3-15.

meaningful distinction between a true and false consciousness and to an emancipating project. From the perspective of women seeking to reverse gender discrimination on the basis that the two halves of the human race are equal in dignity and respect, post-modern rhetoric is seen as deeply conservative politically. Post-modernity, in accordance with its own critique, is incapable of distinguishing valid from invalid claims about the right and the good or of properly using the language of prejudice, inequity, bigotry or unfair discrimination. The most it can do is promote a conservative agenda of consensus-based attitudes, which equates 'good in the way of belief' with pragmatic liberalism.[241]

In this regard, Hick's pluralist thesis, which appears to arise from a "foundationalist", empirical conviction that the ethical teaching and practice of all the major religions are equivalent, requires a non-pluralist, unconditional, non-contextual, unequivocal account of the right and the good. This, in turn, calls for a singular vantage point from which to judge. Hence, it would appear that the foundation on which he builds his pluralist case actually contradicts it.

In contrast, the task of unmasking certain consensus values as a smokescreen for oppressive sectional interests is part of keeping faith with enlightened, critical-emancipatory thought. Hence, post-modernity, under the illusion of presenting itself as the debunker of power-strategies in the name of truth claims, can itself hide an oppressive epistemology. Thus, for example, the rejection of the original meaning of a text in the name of hermeneutic freedom is nothing but an unacceptable violence against the author.

Post-modernity as a cultural theory has shown itself to be remarkably weak as an interpretation of history. As an account of the way in which knowledge is acquired, it has no convincing explanation of scientific methodology nor of progress in science. The tendency to find reasons for scientific 'success' in social, political or cultural factors rather than in the experimental method which subjects data to confirmation or falsification is inadequate. It suggests that the cumulative growth of science is a lottery which, quite by chance, has from time to time been able to give sufficiently satisfactory explanations to allow for technological progress. If ever there was a case of a dogmatic theory seeking to impose itself on the careful accumulation of evidence, it occurs in the post-modern perspective.

Post-modernity is equally undiscerning when it comes to the all-pervading power of late capitalism to shape the contemporary world. David Harvey has written that, because postmodernism

> "emphasises the fragmentary, the ephemeral, and the chaotic…while expressing a deep scepticism as to any particular prescriptions as to how the eternal and immutable should be conceived of, … it signals nothing more than a logical extension of the power of the market over the whole range of cultural production".[242]

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[241] See, *To Stake a Claim*, pp. 45, 49.

[242] *The Condition of Postmodernity*, p. 116. For a similar critique of postmodernism; see, Jim McGuigan, *Modernity and Postmodern Culture* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1999).

Post-modernity easily accommodates the capitalist world-system, for in the last analysis its view of truth, absolutes, identity, the good and the right is oriented to consumer-choice in the realm of ideas, lifestyles, habits, perspectives and opinions. The celebration of difference may be said to coincide exactly with the global manufacture of multiple false-consciousnesses. As Roger Trigg has cogently argued,[243] all that we are left with is rhetoric as a mere exercise in the power of persuasion. However, he goes on to say, there is little point in being skilled in the art of persuasion if there is no ultimate right or wrong, truth or falsity left. Could not the same be said for all pluralist theories of religion? Why should we believe them or persuade others to share our views?[244] They are manifestly self-refuting. If they are assumed, as often is the case, as the basis for multi-religious dialogue, they render the latter conceptually impossible. Is it not high time to abandon pluralist theories of religion as mere epiphenomena of a culturally transient, morally dangerous, and ultimately intellectually absurd "condition", already left behind by real events in time and space?

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[243] *Rationality and Science*, pp. 164-165.

[244] "Too much toleration and even the welcoming of difference can lead to the view that it does not matter which religion one holds, and that can soon be taken to mean that it does not matter whether any religious belief is held at all. Toleration can lead to indifference and that can lead to contempt. If there are so many religious options on offer, and it does not matter which is adopted, then why, it may be asked should one believe any of them at all? Truth has slipped totally out of our grasp", *Rationality and Religion*, p. 54.

SUMMING UP: THE STORY; THE ENIGMA; A SOLUTION[245]

At the end of a judicial process, the presiding judge sums up all the evidence that has been presented in court and then instructs the jury to review the case and come up with a verdict. The story that has been presented in these pages is relatively clear. The third millennium has dawned among the nations of the West with a major cultural dilemma still unresolved. It concerns the source or sources of knowledge about the natural world and the place of human beings within it. Is it possible to have a justified, true belief about the nature and meaning of reality and the way we experience it?

The story

Most of the early, modern scientists believed that the new incentives to explore the world of nature, which arose in the 17th century with the development of experimental methods and more sophisticated instruments, were God-given opportunities to consider the benefits that could accrue to human beings from a more thorough understanding of God's creation. It did not occur to the majority that there would be any major reason why the knowledge accumulated by means of the assumptions and methods of science should conflict with or make redundant knowledge gained through studying and applying the history of God's revelation as recorded in Scripture. The two books – of God's word and God's world – offered separate, but complementary, routes to all the knowledge that human beings needed to enjoy a fulfilled existence.

However, over a period of time, an increasing reliance was placed on knowledge of the world, through rational endeavour and empirical research, as sufficient to explain the existence of the world and humans' place within it. Knowledge, coming by way of the study of what the dominant Christian tradition of the West had hitherto regarded as the self-communication of the God who was the creator of all things, was gradually questioned and, then, either repudiated, ignored or consigned to the private world of individual belief for those who continued to feel the need for some kind of 'transcendent', psychological support.

The questioning had both an epistemological and social dimension. First, knowledge through revelation was considered to be, at best, inferior and, at worst, dubious in comparison with the certainties derivable from systematic rational processes and empirical investigation. The claims of revelation could not be justified as true statements, either in the nature of the case or on the basis of experimental corroboration, by any methods which could command universal assent. Whatever evidence was adduced for believing that the book of God's word contained useful information about reality had to be confirmed by the light of reason and the knowledge being accumulated through discovery of the book of the world. An increasing number of people, from the beginning of the 18th century onwards, became sceptical about the plausibility of the claims of revelation.

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[245] *The Future of Reason, Science and Faith: Following Modernity and Post-modernity* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2007), chapter 11, pp. 217-229.

Secondly, the putative truths of revelation were said to have social consequences inimical to a full flourishing of human life. The European nations were divided along the sectarian lines of Catholic and Protestant confessions. This resulted in (avoidable) military conflicts. In most countries, the national church was deeply hostile to the basic freedom of an independent conscience in matters of religious belief, thereby discriminating against the benefits of citizenship. In general, it was considered by a growing number of educated people that the institution that claimed a special authority in the affairs of state on the basis of revelation was a major hindrance to both academic and political liberties. Rather, the authority of the individual's conscience and rational faculty should be allowed increasingly to determine acceptable social behaviour. The individual's rights should be protected against the interference of the state, whose unquestioned rule was often legitimised and upheld by the Church.

The final nail in the coffin for theistic belief seemed to be the remarkable explanation given by Charles Darwin for the origin of life and the diversification of species. Building on the materialist explanations of the cosmos put forward by the 18th century encyclopaedists, Darwin assumed and elaborated on a mechanism of evolving life that was self-generating. There was no longer any need, apparently, for the hypothesis of God. Another perfectly plausible explication of the seeming evidence for design and purpose in the functioning of nature was now available: the gradual adaptation of living organisms and beings to their environment through a long process of small mutations. The engine for natural selection was survival. This explanation was to be preferred as one that had good scientific credentials and fulfilled the methodological criterion of Occam's razor, i.e. of not multiplying unnecessary hypotheses. From henceforth, for a number of people, atheism became intellectually both acceptable and satisfying.[246]

In the heady atmosphere of freedom from the constraints of unverifiable beliefs and intolerably unprogressive institutions, the considerable difficulties with attempting to establish genuine knowledge apart from reliance on theistic belief were either not recognised or not acknowledged. Only towards the end of the final century of the second millennium did the inherent contradictions of the rationalist undertaking of the modern project become apparent. The chickens of the long tradition of human autonomy, begun in the Renaissance, came home to roost. When humanity starts from itself in a universe closed to any possible external influence it has no grounds for making some of the most basic assumptions necessary for knowledge to be possible: that there is a fundamental distinction between an external reality and an internal perception of it; that the universe is intelligible to the human mind; that there are legitimate and illegitimate ways of reasoning; that the scientific enterprise has an

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[246] Indeed, apologists for atheism, like Richard Dawkins, eloquently and uncompromisingly argue that, given the 'blind, pitiless indifference' of the natural world, theism is simply an irrelevance; see, *River Out of Eden: A Darwinian View of Life* (New York: Basic Books, 1995), chapter 4. However, having acknowledged that human consciousness is imbued with an insatiable curiosity about the purpose of things, he has no explanation for this state of affairs. All he can say is that we are mistaken to have this inquisitive attitude, for many questions about purpose are inappropriate. This is hardly a satisfactory or satisfying conclusion. To say that there is no explanation is not an explanation, for the question remains.

intrinsic value; that the universe operates in stable, consistent and predictable ways; that there are inherent moral values binding on all people, irrespective of history and culture; that there is an overall meaning to being human and purpose for being alive.
The early scientists would, I think, have been most perplexed, had they been able to foresee a future in which many of their successors would have thought it either necessary or worth-while to trade the very foundations that make knowledge intelligible for a narrow, putative certainty about facts of the natural order and a complete freedom for beliefs of any other brand. They would have been inclined to view freedom as an inevitable balance between recognising a given reality and exploring openly the immense variety of components and opportunities deposited within that reality. Adherence to the truth of God's word was not only not inimical to discovering the truth of the (God's) world it was a necessary supposition.[247]
When the massive cracks began to appear in the intellectual edifice erected by the modern project, the scholarly and erudite strata of Western societies did not do the intelligent thing, retrace the steps that had wandered away from the promising synthesis of reality, faith and reason to see how knowledge could once again be reintegrated into an intellectually satisfying and purposeful unity. Instead, many of them exacerbated the dichotomy by appealing to the confused notion of temporally and contextually relative truths. If modernity had sought to emphasise the objective, universal, impartial and neutral nature of knowledge, post-modernity responded by calling attention to its subjective, local, prejudiced and revisable characteristics. On the one hand, immense claims were made for a rather limited field of understanding. On the other hand, considerable doubts were being expressed about the possibility of coming to any sure understanding at all.
In reality, both modernity and post-modernity, in making human experience in a closed system of material cause and effect the measure of what can be known, come close to some form of solipsism. The problem is to bridge the gap between individual perceptions and interpretations of objects and events and an external reality that exists independently of thought about it. The difficulty is compounded by epistemological uncertainty about the content of other people's minds: might it not be that everyone sees things (phenomena, ideas) in quite distinct ways. I cannot be sure that there is correspondence between my outlook and that of others. Once such doubts begin to raise their head, even inter-subjective agreement, let alone confidence in the accessibility of a truth that has the power to make us change our perceptions, becomes dubious and indeterminate.[248] Vacillation, mistrust and suspicion, if not deep scepticism, would seem to be a logical conclusion. This appears to be the price of an intellectual freedom that will not concede any constraints on the enterprise of reasoning.
Needless to say, real scepticism rarely follows. In order to be able to conduct normal, daily business, we have, at the least, to suspend our doubt-inducing epistemological theories. This is most obvious in the area of moral judgement. As a matter of fact, in

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[247] The arguments are set out in chapter 2 of *The Future of Reason*.
[248] See, the discussion in Roger Trigg, *Reality at Risk: A Defence of Realism in Philosophy and the Sciences* (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1989/2), pp. 21ff.

practice, every human being holds to some notion of moral absolutes. In the context of drawing boundaries between what is permissible and what can never be legitimate, human beings, whatever their epistemological theories, demonstrate a robust realism and hold on to the notion of a truth that exists externally to their individual feelings and desires. One might say that, in having to make assumptions which their theoretical beliefs do not allow, they are cheating normal rational argument. As a necessary strategy to live by, many have to make moral assertions for which they do not have proper warrant.

A good example of this dilemma comes in the arguments advanced by John Mackie.[249] He discusses a number of basic premises. First, there are no objective moral values. By objective he means 'part of the fabric of the world'.[250] It is true, nevertheless, that moral judgements appear to be objective that is they purport to be propositions about life, capable of being true or being false. Second, their objectivity has mainly (but by no means only) been founded on the belief in an absolutely good divine being who governs the universe according to his perfect will. Third, as no such being exists (Mackie was an avowed atheist), one of the main arguments for objective morality is removed:

> "The objectivist may have recourse to the purposes of God…I concede that if the requisite theological doctrine could be defended, a kind of objective ethical prescriptivity could be thus introduced. Since I think that theism cannot be defended, I do not regard this as any threat to my argument."[251]

Fourth, then, he argues for an 'error' theory of morals:

> "although most people in making moral judgements implicitly claim, among other things, to be pointing to something objectively prescriptive, these claims are all false."[252]

If there were moral facts, they would by their very nature be prescriptive. However, such an intrinsic prescriptive quality is incompatible with a naturalistic view of the world. Here he introduces his argument from queerness:

> "If there were objective values, then they would be entities or qualities or relations of a very strange sort, utterly different from anything else in the universe. Correspondingly, if we were aware of them, it would have to be by some special faculty of moral perception or intuition, utterly different from our ordinary ways of knowing everything else."[253]

It is also inconsistent with a view of morality that emphasises contingency, personal motivation, choice and desire. Therefore, fifth, moral values are dependent on collective human choice:

> "morality is not to be discovered but to be made: we have to decide what moral views to adopt."[254]

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[249] J.L. Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (Harmondsworth, 1977).
[250] *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*, p. 15.
[251] *Ethics*, p. 48.
[252] *Ethics*, p. 35.
[253] *Ethics*, p. 38.
[254] *Ethics*, p. 106.

They are ultimately no more than attitudes and policies with regard to conduct that people happen to find useful in a particular society at a particular time. Nevertheless, sixth, it so happens that most people have internalised moral judgements in such away that they appear to have the force of categorical imperatives. In other words, morality works because of human beings overwhelming propensity to believe in absolute right and wrong, good and evil. This does not unduly concern Mackie, as he argues for a strict distinction between first and second order views of morality. He is not rejecting moral judgements as such. He is a moral sceptic only in relation to the first order proposition that, to be valid, moral values have to be objective. Even without objectivity, there are good grounds, he believes, for moral concern and action.

This view appears to be akin to a conventionalist account of the moral life whereby people implicitly agree to live together in society on the basis of a series of rights and obligations, in order to keep 'active malevolence' and 'selfish ends' in check. From early childhood people are educated into a set of moral disciplines that a particular society imposes as proper, expected and propitious for the well-being of the whole community. It would appear, in other words, that human life works to its optimum, when people can be persuaded to believe that ethical norms are built into the warp and woof of the natural order.

The problem with this account of ethics is threefold. First, a general realisation that there is nothing intrinsically right or wrong about behaviour is likely to produce an unstable society. Once people see through the deception that there is no truth in the supposed truth of absolute standards they are likely to question the legitimacy of all forms of morality. If they can no longer be persuaded to go along with the myth, they may have to be compelled to believe. Morality then becomes arbitrary, what society as a whole is prepared to condemn, accept or tolerate. Second, the nature of rights and obligations, as it has no ontological backing, is likely to be decided by the play of power. Morality will be decided by an intricate interaction between so-called progressive and traditional forces, not necessarily in the direction of what is good and right, but what is agreeable to the majority. Third, as a matter of fact, morality has been based on the firm conviction that the idea and content of the good is entirely independent of the propensity of human beings to make morality fir their desires and goals in life.

Mackie is incorrect in his statement that for values to be objective they would have to be entirely different from anything else in the universe. On what grounds is moral realism different in kind from scientific or theistic realism? Each, in its own sphere of knowledge, states that there are entities that exist independently of any perception, belief or desire that we might have about them.[255] Certainly moral facts are ,by definition, prescriptive. So too are prudential ones: for example, if we are aware that the snake in front of us is deadly poisonous, we tell ourselves not to pick it up. Thus, he is also wrong in making sweeping statements that consciousness of such objective values could only come through perceptions or intuitions completely different from the means we use to know anything else. The two claims, that together constitute his

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[255] For a general discussion of theistic realism; see, *God and Realism.*

'argument from queerness,' seem to reflect a narrow positivist interpretation of human experience.

So, I am arguing that Mackie's refusal to entertain an objective moral order, his view that a second order defence of moral values is nevertheless self-validating, his belief that the purpose of morality is to solve the problem of conflict and the absence of beneficial cooperation – 'the basic general structure of the human predicament, and this does not change'[256] – adds up to a meagre and inadequate groundwork for serious ethical reflection and action. His stance illustrates once again the paucity of intellectual resources open to those who dismiss the belief that we live in a theistically-shaped universe.

The enigma

This is a summary of the story so far. The clash between modern and post-modern ways of looking at the world continues into the third millennium, although other cultural forces are also on the ascendency. [257] The enigma is that normally intelligent people would, on a massive scale, be willing to sacrifice the possibility of a consistent and unified explanation of the whole of life for an intellectual autonomy which allows the reasoning subject independence from an intrinsic reality to invent their own. The enigma is deepened by the observation that, as matter of fact, scientific exploration and experimentation is dependent on the supposition that the material world is a given: in its regular workings, demonstrable in reliable laws, the scientist has a fixed point of reference in which she can have absolute confidence. To suppose that we are free to construct a natural world how we might like it to be would completely confound scientific research. Belief is constrained by the givenness of our environment. It is, therefore, a huge mistake to pit freedom against order. Freedom is only possible within order. However, in the case of moral, social and cultural norms, there is plenty of room (freedom) to debate which 'order' is true. Without such a point of reference for other aspects of life, human existence is, in the grand scheme of things, quite meaningless.

Attempting to avoid the dichotomy between the pursuit of material facts and intangible values by investing life with our own meaning (or borrowing it 'off the peg' from someone else) does not work, for, although one may deny that there is any given meaning to human aspirations and desires, sooner or later, one will 'bump into' reality unexpectedly. Many contemporary Western people are, apparently, prepared to run the risk. They have calculated that autonomy is a good which outweighs the harm caused by the conflict between their beliefs and reality. Such a choice will probably be rationalised by reference to the unacceptable consequences which have often accompanied commitment to theism. Many have testified to the sense of liberation which abandoning belief in God has brought. However, if the matter is considered

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[256] *Ethics*, pp. 122-123.

[257] One account of the poly-centred nature of dominant, living cultures is given in Samuel Huntington's celebrated and controversial book, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (London: Simon and Schuster, 1997). Part of his thesis is that the hitherto ascendant culture of the West is declining across the globe. It will be fascinating, though unpredictable, to see how the apparently increasing hostility between religious and secular interpretations of reality are played out in the future.

carefully, as we have tried to demonstrate in this study, the cost of autonomy is great. Most muddle through life, unaware perhaps of the inconsistencies of their beliefs and way of life, somehow adjusting choices to the exigencies of their context. It is an enigma, nevertheless, how any thoughtful person can experience human autonomy as intellectually (or, for that matter, emotionally) satisfying.

Another option is not only possible, but intellectually and existentially compelling. The theistic explanation of life gives a complete account of all that we humans either do know or may wish to know. Of course, the fact that it does provide such an explanation does not automatically make it true. It is still possible that life is, in reality, completely meaningless, but that, in order to cope with the *angst* that such a state of affairs would engender, human beings create a theory which aims to rescue existence from incomprehensibility and pointlessness. No doubt, one or another projection theory will remain part of the armoury of theistic detractors until the end of time. The problem with them is that, because they do not do justice to theistic belief, they are inadequate in explaining reality. They fall a long way short of being a good explanation, let alone the best.

A solution

My hope is that this study will have produced sufficient evidence and reasons for establishing the thesis that the contemporary world of the West, in its long historical trajectory, does not have to choose between the assumptions of the modern project and those associated with the condition of post-modernity, or try to live on the basis of a trade-off between the two. The theistic option is rationally available. It does not require one to commit any kind of epistemological self-immolation. In fact, the West has a marvellous opportunity to recover a lost heritage, whose abandonment is in danger of contributing to an increasingly destructive moral and intellectual confusion.

However, theism has to be taken on its own terms. It would be no solution to attempt to reinterpret theism within the parameters of either modernity or post-modernity.[258] The theistic case rests on certain non-negotiable assumptions. The first is that the divine creator of all that is acts within his creation: that which is non-material can determine events within the material. Divine causality, and therefore an open universe, is assumed. This has to be the case, if one is to propose an alternative to the naturalistic story of the uninterrupted evolution of inanimate matter into animate. Theism does not stipulate a detailed account of the mechanisms whereby God interacts with his world. It does, however, draw a distinction between his ordinary and extraordinary activity. The former is encompassed by upholding the normal workings of the natural order, so that the regular order of nature's structures and procedures remain in place. The latter occurs as exceptional actions, when it is necessary to accomplish a result not possible by the usual mechanisms. In theological parlance, these events have been called miracles. They are usually associated with

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[258] As a number of individual theologians and philosophers of religion have attempted: for example, Mark C. Taylor, *Erring: A Postmodern A/Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984); G. Kaufman, *In Face of Mystery* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993); D.Z. Phillips, *Wittgenstein and Religion* (London: Macmillan, 1993); William Drees, *Religion, Science and Naturalism* (Cambridge: CUP, 1995); John Hick, *The Fifth Dimension: An Exploration of the Spiritual Realm* (Oxford: One World, 1999).

God's will to restore humanity to its full and effective working in communion with himself: in other words, events in the history of salvation.

Theism assumes this ability of God to take the initiative, so that the closed circle of human experience reflecting upon itself can be broken into. It is crucial to theism that God is not the creation of faith, in the sense of being the object of human aspirations, needs or mental processes. Rather it is God's speaking and acting within the material world, human history and human lives that creates faith. God's independent existence as a self-sustaining, self-explanatory being is the predicate of any true knowledge that we may have of him. His relation to the universe presupposes his ability to cause human beings to know him through listening to his word and seeing him in action.

For some people this portrayal of theism is enough to make the whole thesis inadmissible. For them there would be a fundamental contradiction between the word and the world of God, just because the world does not admit any irregularities to breach the uniform, unvarying processes of the natural world. The advocate of theism, therefore, has to be able to give a compelling account of God's extraordinary activity in the world. She might begin by pointing out that the most celebrated argument against miracles (that of David Hume) appears to be circular in character. He assumes that a miracle is the equivalent of an event that has never been observed in any age or country.[259] His argument is that there could not be, in principle, any evidence available that should be sufficient to persuade us that a miracle has occurred. However, this is to beg the question. It is not good reasoning to rule evidence out of court before it has been examined. He then goes on to his second main point:

> 'A miracle is a violation of the laws of nature; and as a form and unalterable experience has established these laws, the proof against a miracle, from the very nature of the fact, is as entire as any argument from experience can possibly be imagined.'[260]

This assertion is also to assume what the argument is supposed to demonstrate. It is, therefore, as dogmatic as the claim that a miracle has taken place, whatever the evidence may be. The whole discussion ought to be on the basis of a thorough investigation of whatever purports to be a miracle, i.e. it ought to be conducted on the basis of empirical evidence, not on the basis of *a priori* metaphysical commitments. Although, to ensure the integrity of scientific methodology, the burden of proof may well be on the witness to a miraculous event, the proof cannot be dismissed out of hand prior to its being assessed. The notion of uniformity has to be assumed, but it cannot be made to exclude, whatever the evidence, some counter-instances, otherwise uniform experience becomes the experience of only those who have discounted the possibility of miracles. We could only know that the experience against miracles is

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[259] 'On Miracles' in *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding* (Tom. L. Beauchamp, ed.) (Oxford: OUP, 1999), p. 172.

[260] *An Enquiry*, p. 173.

uniform, if we already knew that all reports of them are false, and that is special pleading.[261]

Of course, it is imperative that a miracle is carefully defined to distinguish it from what cannot, on current scientific theories, be explained. Otherwise, we are entrapped within the God-of-the-gaps dilemma. Most theists approach the subject from two different points of view. First, taking seriously the integrity of scientific method, they wish to defend the propriety of scientists being obliged to trace natural causes for events in the world. This is the normal work of science, based on the supposition that in general there is a causal closure of mechanisms working in the natural order and these can be described in terms of regular laws. It is important for theists to defend the cohesion of science, because they wish to encourage the inquisitive and reflective exploration of the whole of material existence. Secondly, however, experience points to the fact that not every event or phenomenon can be encompassed within a more or less deterministic framework. The notion of scientific law is more open today than in the past:

> 'It is very clear from the science of unpredictability in non-linear dynamic systems (including the human brain) that it is inconceivable that the behaviour of a real-life system involving human beings could be the subject of a totally comprehensive scientific explanation.'[262]

What is required is a theory which allows different types of explanation to operate freely at different levels of reality. Each description is complete at its own level, with no gaps at that level for other perspectives to fill. The natural sciences are marvellously competent at the level of their capacity. They cannot, however, do all the work of explanation. To attempt a total explanation produces the fallacy of scientism, for example in the attempt to reduce the non-material human mind to neuronal events in the brain. As has been cogently pointed out, the resulting behaviourism commits a number of fallacies in the processes of reasoning.[263]

The claim that miracles occur is an affirmation that there are events in the natural world that can be investigated using the tools of science, but whose explanation will be found to transcend an explanation in purely scientific terms. To do justice to the event in question requires other sources of elucidation. In an open system of inference to the best explanation, a wider view of causality is required. Scientists, who are also theists, are working with ideas like top-down causality as a theoretical instrument to account for events so improbable that a comprehensive explanation necessitates the input of an intelligent, outside agency. Miracles are only an embarrassment to those who wish to save metaphysical naturalism at all costs. This, however, can lead to a kind of 'science-of-the-gaps' whereby explanation is always postponed in the hope that some day some naturalistic theory might emerge to account for the phenomenon. There is a sense in which, contrary to the usual argument, theism becomes the most parsimonious explanation both of ordinary and

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[261] See, Norman Geisler, 'Miracles and the Modern Mind' in R. Douglas Geivett and Gary R. Habermas, *In Defence of Miracles: A Comprehensive Case for God's Action in History* (Leicester; Intervarsity Press, 1997), pp. 77-78.

[262] See, *God, Humanity and the Cosmos*, p. 264.

[263] See, *Philosophy Matters*, 79-82, 115-122.

extraordinary events, whilst naturalism has to resort to ad hoc conjectures to try to save its dogmatism.

It has often been argued that the traditional theistic 'proofs' are no longer tenable. Not all agree necessarily.[264] However, even supposing that the ontological, cosmological and teleological arguments are defective in terms of what they are supposed to achieve, namely to make non-belief in a supreme being rationally incomprehensible, this does not exhaust the ability of theism to advance a cogent case for acceptance. As one might expect, attention has been turned to a consideration of ordinary human experience as the channel for reconsidering the cogency of theistic belief. Here, as we have argued at some length, we have a perfectly plausible explanation for the normal experience of reality, for the accurate fit between human mental processes and the processes of the natural world, for the fact that we cannot do without the notion of truth as correspondence, for the intuition of moral absolutes, for the meaningfulness of aesthetic appreciation, for human consciousness and emotions, for imagination and creativity, for the fact that there will always be an unbridgeable gulf fixed between human beings on one side and animals and the most sophisticated machines possible on the other.

The theist does not employ the language of 'proof,' any more than it is normally used in the scientific world today. She rests her case on two complementary lines of reasoning: (a) theism is the best explanation for all our present and conceivable future knowledge, alternative explanations just fail to explain; (b) even those who reject theism, have to live at crucial points in their lives as if theism were true. Probably, in epistemological terms, the methodological approach which leads to theism as the best explanation acts as a moderate foundationalism. The foundation is that the existence of the God revealed in the natural world, in Jesus Christ (God's word made a human being), and in the testimony of Christ's first disciples to the meaning of his life affords the best possible explanation for the whole of reality as we experience it. It is foundational in the sense that it is basic and, as a premise, does not need further beliefs to justify it. At the same time, it is corrigible, in that it is open to challenge, revision and even refutation, does not claim to be immediately self-evident or immune from the need to provide reasons in open debate.

The method is, moreover, both faith-explicit and yet not enclosed in its own web of tradition.[265] Very specifically, it claims to be commensurable with other possible hypotheses explanatory of some of the evidence, in that it is rationally consistent and

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[264] See, the compelling discussion in *God, Reason and Theistic Proofs*, passim.

[265] It is not possible to discuss here whether it is compatible with Susan Haack's 'foundherentism'. It is not, however, congruent with the 'Reformed' epistemology of Plantinga, Wolterstorff and Mavrodes which appears to reject foundationalisms of all colours and replaces them with an epistemology of properly warranted basic beliefs and cognitive proper functioning;' see note 213. The link to the kind of moderate foundationalism that I am advocating is broken by Reformed epistemology in not accepting that justification is needed for knowledge to be asserted. The problem with foundationalism, according to this perspective, is that it does not allow sufficiently for the effects of sin on noetic performance. However, I believe that this case would only be compelling for an extreme interpretation of foundationalism; see, the discussion of the relevant issues in Paul Helm, *Faith and Understanding* (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, 1997), pp. 177-191.

evidentialist.[266] Therefore, in principle, there are criteria held in common for deciding between competing explanations. In the last analysis, a Christian moderate foundationalism would claim that not all alternatives are either equally consistent internally or able to give as comprehensive a clarification of reality in its widest extension.

Then, it is able to do justice epistemically to both a common-sense account of knowing and the most sophisticated scientific theories. We touch reality because it is there in ordinary, everyday experience and in the work of scientific discovery. It is there, because it has been put there in the act of personal divine creation and recreation. We also know it is there because of the impossible consequences of denying its reality.

Finally it brings together belief and action in the process of establishing the truth as something not only discovered in abstract thought, but in living reality. Indeed, the final test of the truth of theism is its ability to explain the intricacies of ordinary human activities, behaviour and conduct. This is not surprising given the theistic belief that the most basic truth about human beings is that they exist in the image of God. That is why it is perfectly possible to start with human experience and conclude that theism is the best explanation for all the knowledge we have.

The Christian theist concludes that the situation of fragmented knowledge that has come about in Western societies as a result of failing to pay equal attention to the two books of God as valid sources of understanding of the whole of reality has been a tragic and unnecessary incident in the cultural history of one continent. One of the main contributions that Christian faith can make, therefore, to the endless challenge of cultural renewal is the exciting prospect of being able to overcome the destructive consequences of the false epistemological dichotomy that has so marked the modern and post-modern projects and to help Western people to experience a hitherto unimagined, reinvigorated world.

However, unlike previous Christian attempts to influence society, this one has to proceed without any pretensions to capture political or social influence for the institutional expression of the faith. Moreover, it is not possible, following modernity and post-modernity, to assert beliefs with the authority of an unquestioned dogma. Christians are obliged by the cultural context in which they live to advocate their views by appeal to the plausibility of the evidence they assemble, knowing they will be challenged by many other opposing interpretations. It would seem that contemporary societies are irretrievably pluralist. People, rightly, are not afraid to question all meta-narratives. Adulthood implies being fully convinced in one's own mind and taking full responsibility for one's own decisions. That is why the kind of debate or dialogue that I have attempted in these pages has to be an integral part of the Christian community's conversation with non-Christians. The task is to make out the best case

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[266] Evidentialism is the view that a belief is justified if and only if there is sufficient evidence for it. Evidence may be interpreted widely, as would be the case in a legal judgement, coming in the form of eye-witness testimony, reliable memory, sense perception, other beliefs, supporting statements and integrity of character. The analogy with the procedures of a law-court is illuminating in that, in order to b creditable, evidence must be able to withstand rigorous cross-questioning. Sufficient evidence is that which satisfies 'all reasonable doubt.' Evidentialism rules out any approach to knowledge that relies on the internal self-justification of beliefs, as in some forms of 'fideism.'

possible for considering the book of God's self-revelation to be the most convincing explanation of the book of the human experience of life.

In addition, the message itself constrains Christians to engage in the task of persuasion. Like the early Church in the hostile and indifferent Roman Empire, one of whose spokesmen asked the fundamental question 'What is Truth?' with cynical intent, the contemporary Christian community bears witness, in weakness and with many imperfections, to the reply of its founder and head, 'God's word is truth.'[267] The encounter between the apostle Paul and King Agrippa[268] is a paradigm of the type of witness we are talking about. Paul was accused by Festus, the Roman governor, of allowing too much learning to drive him insane. Paul replied that he was not out of his mind, but was speaking the sober truth. Moreover, he appealed to the king's own knowledge of the facts and his own convictions as a basis for believing the truth of Paul's message. Agrippa's response was to ask whether Paul was hoping to persuade him so quickly to become a Christian. Paul's final reply was to urge all listening to his witness to share his experience of God. From the point of view of the tension between beliefs and power it is worth noting that Paul at the time of the encounter was a prisoner in chains. Thus we conclude that testimony to the truth, in chastened theory and in peaceable practice, as it is displayed in Jesus, the Christ, is the whole of the Christian community's mission.

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[267] The dialogue between Jesus and Pilate is recorded in the Gospel of John, chapter 18, verses 33-38.; see, also John, chapter 17, verses 14-19. A central aspect of the 'trial' of Jesus, as recorded in this Gospel, is the conflicting understandings of the meaning of power. A decisive contrast is drawn between the power of truth, manifest in the life and teaching of Jesus, and the power of religious and political authority and dominion. Tragically, the Church, all too frequently, has got them confused.

[268] Recorded in *The Acts of the Apostles*, chapter 26.

THE EPISTEMOLOGICAL PREDICAMENT OF THE WEST, DIALOGUE AND INFERENCE TO THE BEST EXPLANATION

Testing the method

So far, I have tried to lay a firm basis for offering, from a Christian perspective, a rational framework to test the conjecture that a Trinitarian theistic reality is the best explanation for the full complement of human experience. However, an assessment of the claims still needs to be made. At this juncture, I can only point in a summary fashion to some of the areas of life in the world where such an examination can take place. For the purposes of this study, we identify two important ones (although there are more).

The operation of the sciences

As often pointed out,[269] science cannot explain itself using the methodological procedures that are strictly speaking inherent to its own working. In other words, in order for there to be an explanation of why science is able to discover the true workings of the natural world and derive from the discoveries technological applications (such as the use of the microchip in my PC) science has to rely on extra-scientific hypotheses about the nature of reality.

Scientists are dealing with a world that is as it is. In other words, it is a given world, whose workings they are seeking to describe, understand and harness for the benefit of human life. They can, of course, intervene and alter the operations of natural processes, but only within certain limits – the limits that those natural processes allow, even if (as in the case of the anticipated use of stem cells in repairing dysfunctional parts of the body) the results may appear to us sensational.

It is not surprising, therefore, that the majority of scientists assume a realist view of the external world:

> "objects and their properties, whether observable (e.g. a rose bush) or not (e.g. God or quarks), exist independently of human thought about them. Irrespective of the way in which humans may experience or reflect upon them subjectively, entities are there in an objective sense, such that an appeal may be made concerning the truth about them against human interpretations. This means that it is always possible, in principle, to correct perceptual errors about them by reference to the entity itself. It has generally been assumed that scientific method is predicated on a realist construction of the world, such that scientific theories are to be interpreted literally, i.e. what they state about the world is true."[270]

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[269] See, for example, Roger Trigg, *Rationality and Religion* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), pp. 77-78, 80-83; Victor H. Fiddes, *Science and the Gospel* (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1987), pp. 38-42; Keith Ward, 'The Limits of Science' (chapter 9) and 'The Explanation of Everything' (chapter 10), in *Pascal's Fire: Scientific Faith and Religious Understanding* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2006).

[270] *The Future of Reason*, p. 238. This view has been challenged by an anti-realist perspective within the philosophy of science, most notably by Bas Van Frassen in his elaboration of 'constructive empiricism'. The arguments on both sides of the debate are too complex to elaborate here, see, for example, Alexander Bird, *Philosophy of Science* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1998), pp. 121-161; James Ladyman, *Understanding Philosophy of*

It is probable that most scientists accept the assumptions that have to be true, if science is going to be able to attain its goals, without undue consideration of their implications. However, questions about the nature of reality, of why the world is as it is, how it has come about that human beings are able to understand its mechanisms and why we should be interested to know the answer to these questions are part of our legitimate curiosity that cry out for explanations. IBE allows us to consider that the existence of an infinite, personal God in continuous contact with a world he has created out of nothing is the most plausible explanation of the most fundamental issues that are thrown up by the successes of science.

This hypothesis is quite distinct from the one that avows that the existence of God can be demonstrated by attending to the evidence of the natural world.[271] In other words, it is not attempting to prove the existence of God, but to state that, given all we know about our experience of the external world and our relationship to it, the best explanation of how things have come to be as they are is the existence of God. Thus, among other things, the creative activity of a personal-infinite God perfectly accounts for intelligibility, the anthropic principle, the reason for existence rather than non-existence, order rather than chaos, and contingency. Let us look at each of these briefly in turn.

Intelligibility

If it were not such a fact of built-in everyday experience, the ability of the human mind to understand the complexity of the universe in minute detail might be astonishing. Why should our environment be comprehensible and transparent to us?

> "Time and again we have found that the physical theories which fit the facts are characterised in their formulation by the unmistakeable quality of mathematical beauty…There is a marvellous congruence between the working of our minds (the mathematical reason within) and the workings of the physical world (the scientific reason without)…Science does not explain the mathematical intelligibility of the physical world, for it is part of science's founding faith that this is so…The meta-question of the unreasonable effectiveness of mathematics insists on being answered. A coherent and elegant explanation would lie in the theological claim that the reason within and the reason without are linked together by their common origin in the Rationality of the Creator."[272]

Not only is this a coherent and elegant explanation, it also puts itself forward as the best possible (or at least the best available) explanation.

The anthropic principle

Science (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 185-192. It suffices for our discussion to observe that a realist view of encounter with external objects is the one that predominates amongst practitioners of science and has survived all attempts to challenge it within the philosophy of science; see, Michael Devitt, *Realism and Truth* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), p. 284; *On Truth and Meaning*, pp. 79-87.

[271] The distinction lies in the difference we noted earlier between induction and explanation.

[272] John Polkinghorne, *Reason ad Reality: The relationship between science and theology* (London: SPCK, 1991), p. 76.

For life to exist as we experience it today, including ourselves, an incredibly finely-tuned set of initial circumstances and continuing environment was and is required for it to have come to fruition:

> "The Anthropic Principle suggests that quite small variations in any of these fundamental specifications of our world would have rendered it anthropically sterile…It is important to emphasize that these delicate balances needed for anthropic fruitfulness are required at all stages of cosmic process."[273]

Alternative explanations, such as the theory of multiple universes or multiple conditions for intelligence, are not explanations of reality as we know it. They are speculations of what might be or might have been the case. The argument, that the only reason we are here and asking these kinds of questions is because the universe is the way it is, is not an explanation but an observation. Again, we may conclude that, if we want an explanation that is rationally sound and in accordance with the evidence we have, then the claim that the universe has been carefully constructed by its Creator, in order that, in due time, it would produce creatures that could appreciate the universe as a personal creation is certainly the best (if not the only) 'show in town'.

Existence rather than non-existence

In attempting to give a coherent answer to the question of being - why the universe exists and how have human beings come to be as they are - it would be perfectly possible to duck the issue altogether, by affirming that it is simply the way it is; there is no reason, and we should not spend time and energy on metaphysical speculations. However, it is an instinctive part of human nature to be inquisitive. We appear to be hard-wired to seek answers to matters that concern our nature, identity, origin and purpose. Not least we are curious about why it should be that human beings are the only living creatures that ask these questions.

There appear to be only two possible answers to the problem of being rather than non-being. The first is that mass, energy and motion just are. They are the basic given that makes all of life possible. At some point, a series of actions and reactions took place spontaneously that set in motion processes that have led over millions of years to the universe we now know. There is nothing else behind this event. It is wholly impersonal and has no meaning. There simply is no overall explanation of why the universe is here and why we are here to debate the question. Stephen Hawking and Leonard Mlodinow, in a recent book, argue that

> "M-theory predicts that a great many universes were created out of nothing. Their creation does not require the intervention of some supernatural being or god. Rather, these multiple universes arise naturally from physical law. They are a prediction of science." [274]

On the other hand, John Lennox [275] points to the fallacy of the proposition:

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[273] *Reason and Reality*, p. 77.

[274] *The Grand Design: New Approaches to the Ultimate Questions of Life* (London: Bantam Press, 2010), pp. 8-9.

[275] Professor of Mathematics in the University of Oxford and author of *God's Undertaker: Has Science buried God?* (Oxford: Lion Hudson, 2008).

> "Contrary to what Hawking claims, physical laws can never provide a complete explanation of the universe. Laws themselves do not create anything; they are merely a description of what happens under certain conditions. What Hawkins appears to have done is confuse law with agency…That is a confusion of category…The laws of physics could never have actually built the universe. Some agency must have been involved…Hawking's argument appears to me even more illogical when he says that the existence of gravity means the creation of the universe was inevitable. But how did gravity exist in the first place? Who put it there? And what was the creative force behind its birth?" [276]

Michael Martin[277] argues that it is illegitimate to draw the conclusion that, because there is no grand plan for the universe, life is without value and absurd and that nothing matters. He finds it hard to argue that there is any kind of general purpose built into the reality we know that is discoverable by us, what we might call a general meaning for our place in the universe and general goals that we are in the world to fulfil. If human life has come about by a chance process, as the result of sufficiently numerous throws of the dice, then it is quite impossible to write any intention into the system. Purpose, intention and goals presuppose rational calculation and will. However, the existence of such in terms of a naturalist assumption about existence is ruled out implicitly. Martin, therefore, is left only with the option that value and meaning are created on the basis of what seems to be best in the way of living. They do not correspond to an independent teleology built into the warp and woof of the cosmos; they are based on functional calculi. In other words, meaning and purpose have not been created for us; we create them ourselves for ourselves.

Thus, we may, by observation and introspection, come to the conclusion that the purpose of human life is, biologically speaking, to survive and pass on our gene pool to the next generation in as good a state as possible. Therefore, we will seek to lead as healthy a life as possible in order that our offspring are not disadvantaged by our recklessness.[278] Or, we may decide that, because we enjoy beautiful objects, the purpose of life is to maximise our enjoyment of them. Or it may seem logical to us that, because we applaud a reasoned life and condemn irrationality, beauty and reason are worth pursuing for their own sake. There is undoubtedly some merit in this approach, if one's presuppositions have ruled out a personal, intelligent beginning to the universe. There really is no alternative to creating meaning for ourselves. However, such a conclusion, whilst it may inject a semblance of purpose into individual lives, does not deal with the underlying problem of absurdity, given that there is no particular value to life that exists as its intrinsic property. Human beings, beginning with their experience of the world, cannot know whether there may be a reality which shapes existence towards an overarching goal. Without this knowledge, it is just as reasonable to conclude that life is absurd as it is to create arbitrary reference points for creative living, and possibly more consistent.

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[276] Article written in *Mail Online*, 3 September 2010.

[277] See, *Atheism, Morality and Meaning* (New York: Prometheus Books, 2002), pp. 185-235.

[278] Any notion of natural selection of those fittest to survive would seem to lead logically to a policy of eugenics. It would be surprising, therefore, if, given purely naturalistic assumptions, eugenics was rejected as morally unacceptable.

Somehow, the attempts of atheists to derive meaning from an existence that is wholly fortuitous seem futile, when an alternative account of reality does a wholly satisfactory job. The alternative does not, of course, amount to a demonstration of its truth. Its cogency, however, as an explanation has led some[279] to conclude that, even if it is not true, it is more conducive to human flourishing to treat it *as if* it were true. And, if humans do indeed prosper most fully by believing what theism tells them is in fact true, this may turn out to be good evidence of its truth.

Order rather than chaos

It has often been remarked that science, though dealing wholly with the natural world, has to assume a metaphysical framework.[280] It begins from the supposition that the reality with which it deals is coherent and consistent. Scientists can make law-like generalisations that they know will hold across time and across the universe:

> "It has to be taken for granted that the world as investigated by science is ordered and structured. This is not a fact that can be discovered through science, since we need a philosophical assumption about the similarity of the unknown to the known…Apparent order may in the last resort be illusory. We still need a basis for our confidence that the discoveries of science can be applied in different times and places with confidence. The applicability of mathematics to the physical world itself illustrates how an underlying rationale appears to be built into the fabric of the world."[281]

How does one account for this ordered world? Surely, to say that this is just the way things happen to be is not convincing. To ensure the utmost stability for the scientific enterprise, it is good to know that the mechanisms of the natural world are secured on permanent foundations. That this is the reality cries out for explication. The likelihood of matter plus energy assembling themselves by chance into such intricate patterns as have been uncovered by scientific exploration are statistically so improbable as to be discounted. This would be an explanation, but hardly a good one let alone the best:

> "A more substantial one is provided by the view that reality is like that because God made it like that…The rationality which mathematics appears to capture may itself be an expression of the rationality of the mind of the Creator."[282]

This, surely, is the kind of explanation that Peter Lipton would refer to as the loveliest. The fact that it is not an explanation that can be demonstrated by scientific means does not detract from it one iota. The only reason for not recognising it as a credible and persuasive explanation would be the claim that science ultimately will be able to explain all things within its own terms. Such a claim, of course, is made on metaphysical not scientific grounds.

Contingency

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[279] For example, Anthony O'Hear, *Beyond Evolution: Human Nature and the Limits of the Evolutionary Explanation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), p. 201.
[280] See, for example, Roger Trigg, *Rationality and Religion*, pp. 80-81.
[281] *Rationality and Religion*, p. 81.
[282] *Rationality and Religion*, p. 82.

As well as having to assume that the natural world is exquisitely ordered, scientists also have to taken for granted its contingency. The world does not have to be as it is. If it was a wholly necessary world, scientists would not have to resort to observation and experimentation to discover what kind of world it actually is, but they would be able to reason from first principles through logic to what it must be. Why should the world be contingent? And, why should a contingent world be ordered?

> "As we have seen, the rational order found in the world is contingent, and theism can explain this through reference to the free creative activity of God. He was not bound by iron laws of necessity but was able to choose one kind of ordered creation rather than another…It becomes reasonable to look for order, but not to anticipate the kind of order that we might find."[283]

This, again, is not an argument from the nature of the world to the existence of a creator God. Rather, it is an argument from the existence of a personal, infinite creator to the reality of our experience of the world: if the God of theism exists, this is precisely the kind of world that one would expect this God to have brought into being and sustained.

In terms of some of the most fundamental aspects of the whole enterprise of science, IBE works well with regard to the claims made by theists about the origin and nature of the universe. As Roger Trigg says, in concluding his discussion of science and theism,

> "It may be that the idea of a Creator can give confidence to those undertaking a scientific investigation into physical processes. Indeed, science, it may be claimed, cannot gain proper legitimation in any other context."[284]

It is not surprising, therefore, to know that modern science has its origins in a period of history when the Christian theist worldview was still accepted as true.[285] One of the main reasons why modern science was able to begin to flourish was the breakdown of the dominance of a cosmology derived from Aristotle. And the principle objection to the Aristotelian theory was its "denial of God's complete sovereignty and freedom in ordering the universe and the consequent belief that God was subject to forces greater than himself." [286]

Practical rationality

In the last analysis, all intellectual work should have as its end product answers to the question, how should we then live? What is good behaviour and action for human beings to follow? By what means do we discriminate between right and wrong values and conduct? From where do we derive our moral sensibilities? Many explanations have been and continue to be given to the question of how one should interpret the good life. The argument of this thesis is that the Christian theistic account, rightly understood,[287] is the best explanation for the existence of conscience, and the best

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[283] *Rationality and Reason*, p. 83.
[284] *Rationality and Religion*, p. 83.
[285] See, 'An Enquiry into the Origins of Modern Science' in *The Future of Reason*, pp. 29-40.
[286] *The Future of Reason*, p. 31.
[287] Unfortunately, anti-theistic accounts of the Christian basis of ethical discernment are often polemical and easily descend into gross misrepresentation. This is certainly the case of A.C. Grayling, *What is Good? The*

grounds for defining moral responsibility. It performs this task in part by analysing the adequacy, or otherwise, of the alternatives.

One fruitful way of approaching the discussion is to consider the consequences for ethical judgement of both a naturalistic and a non-naturalistic interpretation of the origin of life. Another way is to look at the current alternative reasons given for acting morally. I will follow both approaches briefly.

The origin of ethics

As already argued, it would seem logical to affirm that the universe began either as the result of the creative act of a personal, infinite being who exists outside of time and space or that it has come about as a spontaneous, but wholly fortuitous event in which by sheer chance certain chemical reactions set in motion a chain of other events. We can postulate, therefore, either a universe that has been created by an entity existing outside of the material or a universe that has created itself. Either way, over an extensive period of time the incredible complexity of macro and micro organisms that humans recognise today in their surroundings and the sophistication of the rational, aesthetic, moral and spiritual processes that they are aware of in themselves have developed from a singular origin. Which of these two options can best account for the irreducible and eradicable sense of moral obligation that humans experience? Which can provide the best reason for the birth of a sense of right and wrong action?

If the universe is the result of impersonal forces that just happen to have produced the universe as we know it, then there are no guiding principles, intrinsic ends or rational processes that have at any stage shaped the stages of life. According to these basic premises, the existence of ethical intuitions has to be explained on the basis of an absolutely consistent evolutionary materialism:

> "The evolutionary ethicist may not move one foot from a purely empirical, descriptive procedure without calling into question her assumptions."[288]

The basic empirical data adduced is co-operation or altruism in the interests of survival. Such success can only happen when organisms agree not to compete but to share those resources which aid survival and the reproduction of a healthy next generation. On this view, somehow the evolutionary process (nature) has programmed us to believe that co-operation is an obligation:

> "We think that we ought to help, that we have obligations to others, because it is in our biological interests to have these thoughts…we are moral beings because our genes, as fashioned by natural selection, fill us full of thoughts about being moral."[289]

Search for the Best Way to Live (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2003). His chapter, 'The Ordinances of God' is prejudiced and dogmatic in the extreme. Wild accusations and many false statements litter his discussion. One might have supposed that an academic would have tested his statements against a sophisticated case for the Divine Command theory, thus helping to eliminate the many distortions of which he is guilty. One might have though that one aspect of *what is good* is to represent others' opinions fairly and correctly.

[288] *The Future of Reason*, p. 183.

[289] Michael Ruse, 'The Significance of Evolution' in Peter Singer (ed.) *A Companion to Ethics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), p. 504.

This theory attempts to account for our belief that we should act morally towards others, i.e. it is basically descriptive. Its nature is hypothetical, not demonstrable. The theory is demanded by the premises of a purely naturalistic account of the origin of life, in the sense that no other conventional account of ethics could be derived from the original premises. The justification for moral action is reduced to the necessity to survive, which is the overriding intent of the evolutionary process. In order to conform adequately to this end, we have no option but to act altruistically:

> "Our moral beliefs are simply an adaptation put in place by natural selection, in order to further our reproductive ends; that is an end to it. Morality is no more than illusion fobbed off on us by our genes for reproductive ends."[290]

If, however, the universe had a personal beginning, was created for specific ends, was so designed that rational beings would come into existence and was so proposed and fashioned that one particular way of being moral is the necessary precondition for human flourishing, then we have a totally different account of ethical behaviour. The justification for holding to certain values and rejecting others is the nature of reality as purposefully created by a transcendent being, according to his own inherent character. How we know the content of the morally good life will be discussed in the next section.

In one sense, the theistic explanation of the origin of ethics is also descriptive. It, too, is hypothetical and follows from its own original premise, namely that the universe is the result of a personal creation. It is demonstrable only in the way in which we have been conducting the argument so far, namely that it is an inference from experience to the best explanation. It is certainly more coherent than the naturalistic evolutionary explanation, for the latter, to make any sense of moral obligation, is obliged to smuggle in a principle of purpose into an utterly random and contingent biological process. The very notion of survival appears to impart to purely biological processes a teleology of its own. However, survival is not an objective built into evolution; it is merely a description of what has happened to some species. There is no overarching necessity for anything to survive, if the whole business of life in the universe is totally adventitious from beginning to end.[291] Nor, can nature be conceptualised as a subject that somehow drives the processes on, as though it was a kind of causal agent. Nature is simply the sum total of the environment in which we live. It is here by an entirely haphazard, and one might say serendipitous process.

The theistic explanation for the origin of ethics appears to be superior in the sense that ultimately it is able to give a justification that is not based on the naturalist fallacy

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[290] 'The Significance of Evolution', p. 506. A full account of attempts to derive a basis for ethics from the data of evolution is given by Neil Messer, *Selfish Genes and Christian Ethics: Theological and Ethical Reflections on Evolutionary Biology* (London: SCM Press, 2007).

[291] Eric Chaisson, *Epic of Evolution: Seven Ages of the Cosmos* (NY: Colombia University Press, 2006), *passim*, p. 436, maintains that "we have an obligation, a moral responsibility, to survive, especially if we are alone in the Universe. The great experiment that intelligent life represents must not end in failure," quoted in Willem B. Drees, *Religion and Science in Context: A Guide to the Debate* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010), p. 143. The latter author responds by saying, "any transition from facts to values, from 'is' to 'ought', has been deemed a naturalistic fallacy, and rightly so. Any idea that there is a moral obligation to survive and thus continue the history of intelligent life in the universe does not come from science but is a *value* articulated in the context of current scientific understanding," pp. 143-144.

that moral obligation can be derived from a descriptive hypothesis. John Mackie, for example, recognises that, if the God hypothesis were true, objective moral norms would have a substantitive basis, and that without belief in God objective moral principles would be inexplicable. Mackie, however, was an atheist and, therefore, did not have recourse to the theistic foundation for ethical practice. He was left with the dilemma of how it is possible to derive an intrinsic prescriptive quality from a naturalistic view of the world.[292] In other words, he demonstrated in the field of ethical reflection just the kind of epistemological predicament that this thesis has been tracing. The predicament would be resolved, if it were true that moral obligation ultimately is derived from the demand that we live according to the way we were created and the reasons for which we were created. This takes us on to consider what we may know about the foundations for ethics.

Foundations for ethics

Given the acceptance of a non-theistic explanation of the origin of the universe and life within it, and therefore unable to appeal to a theistic account of the origin, nature and justification of objective moral values, what other foundations for justifiable ethical belief and action can be suggested? Here, I would like to assess one alternative, which claims to be able to offer a non-theistic grounding for a belief in moral facts. It is known as 'The Ideal Observer Theory'[293] (henceforth IO). This view has the advantage of attempting to give a coherent rationale for a meta-ethics, i.e. a fundamental principle by which ethical judgements could be rightly considered true or false. Other ethical theories, such as intuitionism or consequentialism do not give us any basic reason for thinking that we may come to know ethical values; they deal more with methods of discerning how we may evaluate different moral options.[294]

The IO Theory is based on the supposition that an IO, a hypothetical being whose two main characteristics would be the possession of full information concerning any situation that demanded moral choice and complete impartiality between divergent opinions about the matter, can be appealed to as an objective standard for making moral judgements:

> "In order to be rationally justified in one's ethical judgements about some action or event one must base these judgements on one's estimate of the reaction of an Ideal Observer."[295]

The criterion by which one knows whether an action is morally right or wrong is the feeling of approval or disapproval with which the IO would react to the action in question.

According to the theory, the IO does not have to exist in reality. Moreover, one should not construe the concept of ideal in an ethical sense:

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[292] See, J. L. Mackie, *Inventing Right and Wrong* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1977) and the discussion of his views in *Atheism, Morality and Meaning*, pp. 36-39 and *The Future of Reason*, pp. 220-222.

[293] I will follow the version of it presented by Michael Martin in *Atheism, Morality and Meaning.*

[294] See, *The Future of Reason*, pp. 184-187.

[295] *Atheism, Morality and Meaning*, p. 51.

> "an Ideal Observer's properties of being fully informed and being completely unbiased are in principle reducible to empirical properties and are not ethical ideals on a par with being completely just or fully benevolent."[296]

In spite of such an assertion, it is interesting to note that what most people would regard as one of the highest of ethical ideals, compassion, is added to the theory in order to make it more credible; for the IO as depicted seems utterly devoid of any empathetic virtues. Nevertheless, the theory still maintains that compassion is not to be interpreted as a moral virtue but as the attribute of a moral judge, necessary for the most desirable procedures that appertain in deciding ethical questions. Presumably, then, other attributes such as total honesty, justice, and non-vindictiveness would also apply.

It is not obvious that making a distinct between moral virtues and moral attributes adds clarity to the whole discussion about ethical decision-making; rather, the issue seems to become more confused. These attributes are irrelevant unless they are morally right. Martin seems to acknowledge this when later he speaks about a torturer generating moral outrage and indignation, because he acts out of hatred and twisted values. Why isn't expressing (moral) indignation against gratuitous hatred and cruelty a moral virtue? In this instance, the theory massively begs the question as to why these attributes are deemed important.

The theory also seems deeply flawed in making a basic distinction between ethical feelings and ethical beliefs. How is it possible to have the first without the second? If the ideal judgement is based on an impartial, omniscient observer being known to have feelings of approval and disapproval, on what are these based? To take the example of the torturer, the IO may know intimately all the circumstances of the case, how though is this going to help a moral verdict, unless one knows, in advance, that torture is morally wrong? And if the IO is completely impartial, how is this relevant to the situation of torture? Does she have to be able to empathise equally with both the perpetrator and the victim, in the process of considering that arguments in favour of torture may be equally valid as those that are against? Full information about a situation as is possible to achieve and a willingness to consider the facts of a case without partiality may be admirable qualities in the processes of making ethical decisions; they do not, however, constitute grounds for believing that some actions are right and some wrong.

As the IO does not exist, but is only imaginary (a kind of thought experiment), the ordinary human being (not being ideal in the sense described) still has to decide what the IO would approve or disapprove of, for the latter cannot communicate its feelings. This being so, how does this theory escape the accusation that it merely projects the subjective feelings of the ordinary human on to a hypothetical (ideal) figure. In the last analysis, the IO is a fiction; the one who decides is not the ideal Observer, but the ordinary observer who decides what is to be approved or disapproved. The whole theory confuses means and ends. It simply does not answer the question about how we know that the feelings of the IO are rightly expressed. In other words, omniscience and impartiality do not constitute the source of ethical

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[296] *Atheism, Morality and Meaning*, p. 50.

values; they merely tell us something about optimum conditions for exercising good moral judgements. For moral approval or disapproval to have any purchase, moral rightness or wrongness must be assumed. However, the IO is not the source of this knowledge.

There are other objections to the theory, which cannot be rehearsed in detail here. For example, it has not overcome the naturalist fallacy of trying to derive moral obligation from observation of the facts of a case, for natural facts do not constitute moral facts. It imports illegitimately into the nature of the IO moral virtues, such as its "loving nature."[297] It lacks a proper moral ontology, namely that it has no basis for warranting a metaphysics of personhood and its intrinsic dignity or value – this, on the basis of a consistent naturalism, can hardly be a natural property. There is no proper defense against the approval of morally objectionable consequences – Martin argues that the IO might approve of cruelty in certain circumstances on the grounds of its consequences,[298] thus making ends justifying means an acceptable moral principle. The combined weight of these objections seems to sink the theory as a plausible account of moral reasoning. It is an attempt to suggest that a plausible naturalistic foundation for moral discernment can be envisaged.

Perhaps, in terms of our debate about the predicament of epistemology in the West, the fundamental reason for rejecting the theory as inadequate is that the theistic alternative already possesses all the positive attributes of the theory, without at the same time sharing its failures. The IO might, at first sight, be mistaken for a god-like figure, except that it is impersonal and hypothetical, whilst God is personal and exists. The IO is credited with moral virtues, even though the theory does not allow this, whilst God is the very expression and fount of all moral virtues: he is the very definition of goodness, compassion, justice, etc. The IO cannot communicate her approval or disapproval – this has to be extrapolated by the imperfect human person – whilst God is alleged to have communicated his will and laws to humanity.

A theistic account of both the origin and foundation of moral values seems, therefore, to be the best explanation. However, serious objections have been made to the theistic interpretation on the grounds that the so-called divine command theory of moral obligation is seriously flawed. We need, therefore, briefly to review these objections and determine whether they can be resolved.

Opposition to the Divine Command Theory

The theory normally asserts that "the standard of right and wrong is constituted by the commands and prohibitions of God."[299] This may be further explicated by adding that the will of God is the standard for measuring the goodness or badness of moral judgements and actions. This could mean that the ethical quality of any system of values depends in the last analysis on whether they conform to, or veer away from, whatever it is that God decrees.

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[297] *Atheism, Morality and Meaning*, p. 87.

[298] *Atheism, Morality and Meaning*, p. 94.

[299] Janine Marie Idziak, 'Divine Command Ethics' in *A Companion to Philosophy of Religion*, p. 453.

One obvious problem with the theory is that the existence of God is assumed. For an atheist, the theory can be immediately dismissed on the grounds that for her "there are no good reasons for the belief that a theistic God exists…There are (however) good reasons for believing a theistic God does not exist."[300] If God does not exist, then there is no God to will and command. However, the reasons given for not believing are usually conventional: a summary dismissal of the so-called arguments for God's existence; the existence of evil in the world; the number of those who fail to believe; the putative incoherence of God's various attributes; the inadmissibility of miracles as acts of God.[301]

This is not the place to discuss these well-worn paths, except perhaps to point out that those who reject miracles do so by making themselves totally immune from falsification, for they have decided never to allow any evidence that transcends the bounds of the scientifically demonstrable to be considered. In effect, they have ruled miracles out of court *a priori*, and they have done so on grounds that do not spring from proper scientific considerations. This arbitrary presumption in favour of naturalism means that the weight of evidence in favour of theism is never properly assessed.[302]

There are, nevertheless, serious arguments against the divine command theory, even when theism is acknowledged as probable. They arise from the two commonest statements of the theory, sometimes given the names of theological objectivism (TO) and theological subjectivism (TS). In the first case,

> "God approves of right actions just because they are right and disapproves of wrong actions just because they are wrong."

In the second case,

> "Right actions are right just because God approves of them and wrong actions are wrong just because God disapproves of them."[303]

Now, the difficulties with these statements are almost immediately obvious. If TO is correct, then there is a standard of morality that exists independently of God's commands. And, if TS is correct, then morality is quite arbitrary, since God has the power to approve or disapprove any course of action. He might, for example, command human beings to torture babies. Moreover, this would not be a genuine moral theory, since people would not act on the basis of spontaneous moral virtue, but out of fear of punishment or in hope of gaining merit or receiving a reward. Thus,

> "the one theory…gives God everything to do with what turns out not to be morality, while the other theory preserves the essence of morality at the cost of giving God a walk-on part that could easily be written out of the play."[304]

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[300] *Atheism, Morality and Meaning*, p. 115.

[301] Thus, *Atheism, Morality and Meaning*, pp. 115-118.

[302] See, the careful and sophisticated case assembled on behalf of theism in Paul Copan and Paul K. Moser, *The Rationality of Theism* (London: Routledge, 2003), *passim*.

[303] Norman Kretzmann, 'Abraham, Isaac, and Euthyphro: God and the Basis of Morality' in *Philosophy of Religion*, p. 421.

[304] 'Abraham…,' p. 424.

As a result of this dilemma, theists have postulated a modified divine command theory. God can command or will only what conforms to his nature. As, by definition, God is absolute goodness, justice and loving-kindness, he could only desire human beings to follow whatever those supreme ethical virtues demand. Thus,

> "his commands – far from being arbitrary – are in accordance with that nature."[305]

Of course, the dilemma may be pushed one stage further back by asking whether God's nature is good, just and loving because it is God's character or is it assumed to be God's nature because it is good, according to independent sources. The main answer has to be that there simply are no other independent sources of morality (particularly if one adheres to a naturalist philosophy). Morality is either grounded in the perfectly good character of God, and this is the definition of goodness (self-sufficient and self-explanatory), or morality is invented for purely pragmatic purposes (to contain self-destructive forces and promote survival). In the latter case, it ceases to be morality for the same reason that a bare command theory is not moral, namely that the intrinsic virtue of performing the good, just because it is good, is absent.

The revised dilemma still appears to commit the error of assuming that God has moral obligations to some external moral standard. But this is not so. There could not be anything that impinged on God to impel God into a certain course of action. God is entirely free of external constraints. God is only constrained by God's own nature. God cannot act or command others to act against the way God is. So, in the last analysis, everything hinges on the way God has revealed himself, for the corollary to any divine command theory is that human beings have access to the nature, purposes and will of God, so that we may know who he is and what he is like.

There are other arguments employed against the divine command theory, which are of lesser weight (although they have to be part of the debate about the epistemological and ontological basis of moral values). First, we cannot know what God wills, for we cannot have good reasons for choosing between different versions of God (religious plurality is said to throw an epistemological spanner into the works of recognising only one valid set of truths about God). This is a complex issue. However, I believe that there are criteria by which we may assess truth-claims, not least the argument from inference to the best explanation. One of these would be precisely the question of moral value. What does each religion say that God commands and forbids and how do these compare? On what points of moral value do they disagree (e.g. the nature of punishment, the status of women in society or the legitimation of violence), and what do the differences say about the religion's concept of God?[306]

Secondly, there is the argument that human beings possess moral sensibilities irrespective of whether they believe that God exists; whereas, if God does not exist, then on the basis of the divine command theory, morality would not exist, everything would be permitted. That human beings who, for example, profess atheism possess

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[305] Paul Copan, 'The Moral Argument' in *The Rationality of Theism*, p. 166.

[306] I have myself attempted one kind of comparative analysis between the Christian and Muslim faiths with regard to the use of force and the place and purpose of suffering; see, J. Andrew Kirk, *Civilisations in Conflict? Islam, the West and Christian Faith* (Oxford: Regnum, International, 2010).

moral feelings cannot be denied. However, the atheist still has difficulty in explaining why they exist and whether, on her presuppositions, they should exist. Moreover, the fact of moral feelings does not explain the sense of moral obligation, nor give any account of why moral obligation is a superior moral category to self-interest, indeed the very nature of morality in itself. The only defense against the-everything-would-be-permitted-argument is consistency: namely that I should always treat others as I wish them to treat me. This is a rational argument, but it does not respond to the case of those whose religion, philosophy or ideology tells them that they are ontologically superior beings who, therefore, do not adhere to the 'golden rule.' Only an ontology that tells them categorically that no human being is superior to another can ground 'the golden rule' adequately. Is there any other ontology, apart from theism, that provides such a foundation?

In this section we have attempted to show how IBE may work with reference to the theory and practice of ethics. We come to the preliminary conclusion that a case can be made out for considering that a theistic basis gives a more coherent, more comprehensive and more rationally satisfying account of the whole human experience of making moral judgements than any naturalistically-based alternative. We deduce, therefore, that we are justified in believing the adequacy of the theistic view. However, the case falls short of indicating that the view is true. We should finish our discussion, therefore, by considering the status of IBE as a method of dialogue with reference to Christian mission in the context of the epistemological predicament of the West.

CONCLUSION

Engaging the West's epistemological predicament

In this thesis, I have set out the case for a particular way of engaging in dialogue with the main assumptions of secular Western humanism regarding the fundamental questions of epistemology. I have argued that this is an authentic aspect of Christian mission and therefore is to be located academically in the discipline of missiology. As dialogue with people who hold different views about how ultimate reality is to be understood is generally recognised as a significant part of the calling of Christian communities, this subject is justified as a focus for missiological discourse.

I have discussed the meaning of epistemology as referenced in mainstream philosophical literature, accepting the provisional opinion that it concerns the search for justified true belief about the whole of human experience. I have continued by outlining why it is safe to say that Western culture is in the midst of an epistemological crisis. It springs from doubt about having sure access to knowledge that matches the total human experience of existence, covering both the external reality of the natural world and the internal reality of thought, consciousness, conscience, aesthetic appreciation, language and the yearning for transcendence.[307]

The predicament can be understood in terms of a series of questions, many of which can be answered satisfactorily by the natural sciences, but some of which remain beyond their scope to supply answers to. If there are answers to questions about the uniqueness of the human experience of being human, they have to be sought beyond knowledge that can be gained by empirical investigation alone. In other words, there is a marked divorce in the current state of epistemological discussion in the West between well-grounded, and largely confirmed, knowledge of the natural world and knowledge of other matters that are intrinsically not open to empirical verification.

I have argued that the main consequence of the epistemological predicament, characteristic of Western societies, is the loss of a unified field of knowledge.[308] Science has its authentic methodologies, which are valid and fruitful in describing the workings of the physical environment in which human beings are enmeshed. It cannot, however, within its own terms account for the deeply human needs that are common to the human species. The question remains, therefore, whether there is any hope of finding a reliable, alternative source of knowledge, complementary to the discovery of the sciences, that can give plausible answers to these needs.

Historically, Western societies have been shaped by the belief that the universe is the inventive work of a personal divine being who has made all that is by a series of unconditional creative acts, and whose crowning achievement was to form a being like

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[307] In the article 'Christian Mission and the Epistemological Crisis of the West', I have argued that the Western crisis of knowledge manifests itself as inconsistency, either within a particular intellectual tradition or, even more evidently, between moral reasoning and practical living. I stated there that "inconsistency degrades and debilitates the meaning of human existence", whilst "to think coherently and to be able to make one's actions harmonize with one's thinking is to enhance the dignity of human life"; see, *To Stake a Claim*, pp. 166-167.

[308] This reflects the cognitive aspect of human experience. From a more existentialist perspective, the consequence can be seen as the failure to achieve a fully satisfied life, namely the capacity to make sense of every aspect of existence by understanding how the different parts fit into a satisfactory, explanatory whole.

himself. It has also been assumed that this same (uncreated) being has made himself known through specially chosen messengers, culminating in a personal appearance at a very specific point in time. This self-revelation has, until relatively recently, been accepted as an authentic account of the origin and nature of the whole of existence. Unfortunately, those to whom the trusteeship and interpretation of the story of God's acts in time and space have been entrusted have fought one another, in order to gain the exclusive rights to God's 'memoirs'. The struggle for ascendency within Europe has cast doubt upon the claims being made by those bodies (the churches) which have attempted to maintain their prerogatives by decidedly non-spiritual means.

Gradually European peoples have become disillusioned with the spiritual hegemony that churches (often in alliance with political vested interests) have sought to impose. They have turned, therefore, to what has promised to offer an alternative understanding of the origin and function of the universe and the place of human beings in the cosmos. The natural sciences, through a multiplicity of research projects, have accumulated a vast store of knowledge, well tested, and demonstrated to be in accordance with a natural order governed by consistent law-like operations. However, they are not able to answer those very distinctive questions which only human beings ask, and which consequently set them apart as a special species.

Nevertheless, because of the success of the sciences in discovering the true nature of the physical universe, the methodology by which they operate has rightly become the standard one.[309] Henceforth, all claims to knowledge have to resonate with both the methodology and the findings of the whole scientific venture. Here, however, we see the current epistemological predicament. Rationally, we can only give credence to knowledge that has been gleaned through scientific processes. However, the knowledge thus acquired does not tell us anything of value about our own inner experience of ourselves and the environment about us. What I am proposing as a missiological procedure for the Christian community is to take a proven scientific method of discovery (IBE) and apply it to those 'thick' issues (to use Hilary Putnam's language), which evade dissection by the normal practices of the physical sciences.

I am also proposing that, missiologically, the Christian community treats this process as an instance of dialogue. It is necessary to see it in this way, because it is the case that consistently secular forces have arrived at the conclusion that the physical sciences will be able to arrive ultimately at a full explanation of everything. The purpose of dialogue is to increase the circle of knowledge and understanding, not by accepting agreement at a low level of explanation, but by witnessing to and arguing

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[309] There are objections, most notably in post-colonial discourse, to the 'coercive' appeal to scientific methodology as a cover for Western intellectual imperialism, whether in its Christian or Enlightenment dressing. This also seems to be part of the agenda of the 'radical orthodox' school of theology. The accusation surfaces again, coincidentally in the context of the science/religion debate, in an article written by F. Gironi, 'Turning a Critical Eye on *Science and Religion*: Theological Assumptions and Soteriological Rhetoric' in *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion*, 22 (2010), pp. 37-67. His complaint seems to be that Christianity has defined humanity in an idiosyncratic way, which is particular, limited and local and which builds on a synthesis of modernity and Western theological categories. This is not the place to respond to his critique, except to say that a dialogical method using IBE, as a method of exploring alternative interpretations, should avoid his criticisms.

for the most convincing explanation of the greatest possible range of evidence. In other words, the dialogue proceeds by way of garnering the evidence and then setting out the various alternative cases that may be able to explain the phenomena under discussion.

I have attempted to demonstrate the enormous advantages of this method: the two main ones are that it uses the same rationality as the sciences and that it successfully unifies the whole field of human experience. I have sought to demonstrate how the method would work as an explanation of the ability of scientific research to uncover the nature of the material world and as a reliable indicator of the ultimate source of moral knowledge. If space had permitted, it would have been possible to have demonstrated its functioning in the case of religious belief systems. I have attempted to give reasons why I consider dialogue with a post-Christian, secular culture should have first priority for missiological engagement in the West. Fundamentally, it is a question of the most appropriate form of contextualising the Gospel in current Western culture. I have stated my belief that a secular culture is not necessarily an irreligious one. Yet, its religiosity (or 'spirituality') takes on a unique form in the West, just because of the distinct history of Christianity in the last four hundred years or so.[310]

This means that, in the West at least, dialogue can only be meaningful in the context of an understanding of the Christian heritage embedded in its history. So, I would argue that the arcane, highly personalised religiosity of peoples who have imbibed Western culture, exhibited in many surveys conducted throughout the continent, should not be assimilated to a general interpretation of religious life and experience borrowed from other parts of the globe; it should be understood as a response to very particular circumstances. I have also argued that a pluralist theory of religions should be perceived as the outcome of European intellectual history, particularly in its most recent post-modern manifestations. It suffers, therefore, the same fate as its post-modern counterpart, which although it rightly contests any arrogant, autocratic belief system, cannot avoid the inconsistencies of its relativistic perspective on reality. So, the well-chronicled upsurge in spiritual practices among some Western people has to be understood as a unique phenomenon, to be interpreted within its own particular terms of reference.

In one way or another, the articles collected for the purpose of this dissertation seek to engage missiologically with the epistemological predicament of the West as a cultural issue. They argue that, within the parameters recognised as acceptable for a discussion of the philosophical issues that are raised, there is no solution. The secular premises which prevail, so amply and cogently displayed by Charles Taylor, preclude a solution to the predicament. It is necessary to take a step back to the time in European intellectual history when knowledge was treated as a unitary whole, when the two principal sources of knowledge, the word and world of God were considered compatible and complementary. However, in order to deal with the dichotomy that we have been tracing here, and the assumptions on which it is based, it is necessary to

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[310] Following Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, I take the Reformation to be a decisive watershed between two different ways of conceiving the interaction between God, the church and society.

find and argue for an approach to the question of knowledge that, within the context of the epistemological split, has not yet been given the attention it deserves.

I have attempted to set out the advantages of the method (IBE), especially for a context dominated by the philosophical underpinnings of the scientific method. First, the method is easily recognisable within both the natural and social sciences. Hence, a theistic approach to reality does not have to engage in special pleading, appealing to the categories of faith or experience of the transcendent as somehow exempt from the normal critical processes involved in seeking to establish the truth about the whole weight of human experience. For this reason, the method disputes all forms of fideism, understood as an approach to the knowledge of the transcendent that is self-contained within its own self-authenticating world of belief. Fideism rejects the need for independent rational or evidentialist support for the claims that are made for religious convictions. It is likely, therefore, to treat with some suspicion a method that exposes itself to comparative critical engagement, free from claiming some privileged epistemic path to knowledge. At the same time, fideism would find it hard to establish mutually acceptable criteria that would make the kind of dialogue we have been envisaging possible.[311] A non-evidentialist approach to faith seems to be committed to saying that faith has its own esoteric reasons for believing, but these are not open to normal rational scrutiny. It would seem to follow from this premise that mission as dialogue, of whatever kind, would become entirely problematic, for there would be no common ground for the initial conversation to get started.

Secondly, the method appears to confirm a common-sense view of knowledge. If knowledge is justified true belief, then the justification for believing something to be true is that the evidence for the belief is strong. The answer that most people would give to the question, why should I believe, is, because the evidence warrants it. The famous axiom enunciated by William Clifford that "it is wrong always, everywhere and for everyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence"[312] is intuitively correct. The positive corollary to the statement is then applied, for example, in a court of law, where a person is considered innocent until and unless there is sufficient evidence to bring a conviction. If the evidence is insufficient, the case is declared unsafe and the prosecution dismissed.

Clearly, Clifford's maxim begs a number of questions: what counts as evidence? Under what conditions does a body of evidence support a particular belief? What does it mean for someone to possess evidence? In the dialogical engagement with contemporary secular assumptions, it needs to be established that evidence cannot be confined to sensual observation and controlled experimentation, for then there would be no evidence for making such a reductionist proposition. It also includes reasoned discourse, historical analysis, memory and testimony. The sharp separation made by some contemporary atheists between empirical demonstration and faith is, therefore,

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311 See the discussion in Terence Penelhum, 'Fideism' in *A Companion to Philosophy of Religion,* pp. 376-382, and 'The Confusion of Epistemology', *Tyndale Bulletin,* 55.1 (2004), n. 57, p. 152.

312 *Lectures and Essays* (London, 1879).

invalid. In a legal case, admissible evidence goes beyond the merely forensic, and can legitimately be used to come to a verdict 'beyond all reasonable doubt.'[313]

From a missiological point of view the method is non-imperialistic, non-intrusive and non-violent. It works through persuasion, on the basis of the cogency of the case, not through coercion in the form of inducements, constraint or intimidation. Perhaps, without stretching the matter too far it is a way of returning to the original New Testament understanding of dialogue (*dialegomai*), meaning to conduct a discussion,[314] to argue a case, debate or convince. In the second half of the Acts of the Apostles, it had become a semi-technical term for Paul's method of teaching in the synagogues, being translated by the NRSV as "argue," "have a discussion," "hold a discussion," "talk," "dispute," and "discuss" (e.g. Acts 17.2, 17; 18.4, 19; 19.8f.; 20.7,9; 24.12, 25).[315] It seems legitimate to conclude, therefore, that, in the quite specific context of the epistemological predicament of the West, mission as dialogue with a post-Christian, secular culture can best be fulfilled through adopting and adapting the methodological tool of IBE.

I find that over the years that these articles cover, there is a certain consistency in the convictions followed. I have been accused of operating within the general framework of modernity, "unable to cope with the new environment of uncertainty, complexity, and ambivalence that anthropologist David Scott ascribes to postmodernism."[316] This is partly true, and partly false. It is true, in so far as I affirm strongly the universal rationality of scientific research and repudiate all post-modern attempts to locate its methods and discoveries within the contingencies of social intercourse.[317] It is false, in so far as I contest modernity's unfortunate and unnecessary turn to rationalism and empiricism. As far as post-modernity is concerned, I have dealt at considerable length in various publications with what I consider both its strengths and its weaknesses. Suffice it to say here that the 'uncertainty, complexity and ambivalence' of the post-modern condition is largely of its own making, the result of the inadequate premises which have led to its proposals.

The judgement that IBE could possibly prove a fruitful heuristic device in the missiological task of engaging with the contemporary epistemological predicament manifest in Western culture has been there from the time in the early 1990s when I first began to focus on this area as a missiological challenge. However, at the beginning, the

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[313] Further on the methodological advantages of inference to the best explanation as a procedure for establishing the knowledge of any affirmation, see *The Future of Reason*, pp. 125-126, 204-205, 226-228.

[314] See, Arndt and Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Cambridge: CUP, 1957), p. 184.

[315] See, Colin Brown (ed.), *Dictionary of New Testament Theology (Vol. 3)* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1992), p. 821.

[316] Rosemary Dewerse, summarising Jorgen Skov Sorensen, *Missiological Mutilations – Prospective Paralogies: Language and Power in Contemporary Mission Theory* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2007) in *Mission Studies* 27 (2010), p 100. I have not had access to this work, so am not able to ascertain how the author has come to this conclusion, or on the basis of which of my publications. He will not, for example, have had access to my extended treatment of modernity and post-modernity in *The Future of Reason* (published two years after his research was completed). However, the implied critique is general in tone, and can also be answered generally.

[317] Rosemary Dewerse notes the irony of "Sorensen's bid for a postmodern paradigm in mission theory, conducted within the expectations of a tightly reasoned, rigorously researched, and "modern" PhD format."

intuition was barely formed and quite unfocussed. In the intervening years it has become more definite and convictional. The present study, therefore, is the fruit of nearly 20 years work, interspersed with attention to other concerns. I admit that it is probably still more of a potential theory than of proven practical worth. The difficulty is that, although Christians may speak enthusiastically about dialogue, the value of its practice can only be measured, if and when there are dialogue partners willing and eager to be engaged around the kind of issues raised in this piece of research.

Mission as dialogue: the ends and means in question

This thesis, then, is a multi-faceted approach to the perennial calling of Christian believers to bear witness to the truth as it is in Jesus Christ. This implies the communication of an interpretation of the reality of human life whose source exists beyond the musings of human reason reflecting on the inner and outer worlds of human experience. Such an interpretation assumes that there is knowledge, as justified true belief, of the reality and meaning of life that is available outside of empirical investigation. The calling to mission also implies a particular context. This thesis assumes that the *principle* context for mission in the West is the unresolved epistemological predicament and its consequences, which we have described in the Introduction and further expanded on in the various articles.[318] The noetic parameters of Western culture present a very particular challenge and opportunity for Christian witness.

I argue that probably the best form of witness in this situation is dialogue. Dialogue has a number of component parts that need to be honoured, if the conversation is going to be fruitful. It assumes that the partners in dialogue have basic beliefs that are distinguishable in principle from contingent, cultural forms of them, that there are points of contact between different belief systems that enable a genuine intellectual engagement to take place, that the parties to the dialogue respect one another and believe that they may have something to learn as well as to give in the exchange, that the opinions we do not share are fairly represented, and finally that the issues under discussion are significant matters not only for theoretical considerations, but also in daily living.[319]

I argue, further, that probably the best form of dialogue is to work through together the principle of IBE as a method of arriving at the probable truth about the whole reality that we human beings experience. Its advantages are manifest in a culture inclined to put its trust in scientific experimentation and outcomes. First, it is based on evidence that can be rationally assessed and empirically tested. Secondly, it is open to a universal discourse, from which nobody in principle is excluded. Thirdly, it commands the widest possible acceptance as it is applicable throughout many disciplines – each of which are in engaged in the task of explanation. Fourthly, when rightly applied, it avoids begging questions about prior beliefs. So, it is not tradition-

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[318] Hence the argument in the article, 'Christian Mission in Multi-Faith Situations,' that interreligious dialogue in the post-Christian, secularised environment of Western culture may be a diversionary tactic. I am not arguing that it is intrinsically misplaced; only that it is contextually of secondary importance.

[319] Further on the subject of dialogue, see J. Andrew Kirk, 'Mission as dialogue: the case of secular faith' in *Mission under Scrutiny* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2006), pp. 26-45.

dependent in the sense that dialogue can only begin when different traditions are judged to be commensurate; rather basic beliefs are brought in as explanations as a second stage hermeneutical exercise. Fifthly, it is essentially a discussion about the nature of reality in its variety of forms, a reality that to one degree or another everyone is part of.

If the apprehension of truth is the most fundamental issue in epistemology, then IBE is concerned to offer the most comprehensive and intellectually and existentially compelling evaluation of the realities of existence. Its pragmatic value lies in its ability to distinguish between truth and error and fact and fantasy. There is no question that lies outside its purview. It is, therefore, equally applicable to scientific research, moral debate and religious claims, each of which, in its own way, appeals to a transcendental realism.

In spite of the scepticism of post-modern thinking, human beings need to situate their lives within a discourse that offers a meta-interpretation of their experience. This has been called a grand narrative, an account of life that links together all the fragmentary parts into a plausible whole. Human beings can be seen to flourish best when they can make sense of the past, present and future. In the West, there are still only two major grand-narratives that offer this kind of interpretation: modernity in its current form of liberal, secular humanism and Christian faith.[320]

I argue that liberal secular humanism gives an inadequate account of reality in a number of crucial areas. It is unable to account for the conditions necessary for the scientific enterprise to function. It cannot offer adequate grounds for knowledge to be possible – the total coherence between subject and object, the observer and the observed. It is forced to be reductionist in its attempts to explain the rich experience of human life, failing on the basis of a naturalist, evolutionary account of the rise of human life to account for the existence of consciousness, the self, rationality, the inherent dignity of the human species, moral duty and aesthetic appreciation. In a meaningless world, it is hard pushed to offer an explanation as to why human beings wish to invest their lives with meaning. This would seem to suggest a poor adaptive strategy, since there is an apparent incoherence between reality (senseless) and what human beings long for (significance and value). A neo-Darwinian evolutionary account of the history of the universe makes the world both impersonal and hostile. Secular humanism is committed to continuing the myth that the worlds of science and faith have to be confrontational. It appears to operate on the basis that they are incompatible alternatives. As a result, it converts itself into a kind of pseudo-religion: methodological naturalism translates into metaphysical naturalism.

What may be achieved in this form of mission?

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[320] I acknowledge that there are a number of other grand-narratives represented today in Europe – Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, the remnants of Marxism and the resurgence of Fascism. I also am aware of the fact that adherents of a post-modern reading of culture disclaim any notion of grand-narrative. In the former cases, other religious or ideological beliefs do not have the same impact yet on Western culture, although most of them certainly offer alternatives to the two main protagonists, and may take centre stage later if the epistemological predicament develops into a deep cultural crisis. In the latter case, Post-modernity cannot escape so easily from the accusation that it too offers a grand-narrative, for, in spite of its relativistic rhetoric, it certainly stands for a number of fundamental values.

Up to this point, I may have seemed to have presented IBE as a kind of methodological trump card or panacea that will solve all the epistemological difficulties, with which able minds have grappled over hundreds of years. I need to redress the balance and admit that there are limitations to what the method may accomplish with regard to the acquisition of justified true belief. Three particular difficulties have been raised. First, there is the question of under-determination. By this is meant the lack of sufficient evidence to be able to make proper inferences from inductive reasoning:

> "Inductive inference is…a matter of weighing evidence and judging probability…To say that an outcome is underdetermined is to say that some information about initial conditions and rules or principles does not guarantee a unique solution."[321]

IBE is evidence based. However, the evidence for the explanation may be too sparse for any reliable conclusion to be drawn. Thus, in the case of seeking to gauge the best explanation for a particular crime, the evidence adduced by the prosecution may rest far too heavily on circumstantial and indirect incidents and events, such that inference to a particular perpetrator would produce an unsafe verdict. The only conclusion warranted would be to suspend judgement, unless and until more conclusive evidence came to light.

Secondly, there is the problem that, not being omniscient, human beings do not have access to all possible explanations. They only have recourse to the explanations that are to hand or, if these seem to be unsatisfactory, to others that they may be able to imagine given the availability of data at a particular moment of time. Now, one of these explanations may possibly prove to be the best, and yet not correct, for there may yet be another as yet unknown explanation waiting in the wings. It would, then, also be unsafe to rely on one explanation, about which there will be doubts, even though it can be shown to be the best on offer. Again, the wise course would be to suspend judgement, in the expectation that a more satisfactory conclusion will turn up at a later date. This problem, as has often been pointed out, affects theistic explanations on the suspicion that we are always dealing with a god-of-the-gaps type of argument. Given time and accumulated knowledge of the world, the sciences will be able to come up with a satisfactory explanation that does not need to appeal to extra-terrestrial first causes. Such explanations possess the merit of simplicity and parsimony.

Thirdly, even if theistic explanations provided accounts of existence that it was justified to believe, because they are plausible and elegant, it is hard to see how they could be shown to be true. If it were possible to demonstrate the truth of the explanations, people would have little or no excuse for not believing. Hence, although a theistic believer is warranted in believing certain hypotheses about God's action in the world, and may be convinced in her own mind that these point correctly to the reality of the case, she cannot claim that they are demonstrated beyond all reasonable doubt. In other words, we cannot move much beyond a probabilistic defence of theistic explanations. The definition of knowledge would then change from justified true belief to 'justified probably accurate belief'. When we ask what is the probability that a

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[321] *Inference to the Best Explanation*, p. 5.

particular hypothesis explains a particular sequence of events – in the case of our interests, the arrival of the highly original mammal called *homo sapiens* – we may rephrase the question in terms of propensity:

> "the propensity theory…takes probabilities to be primitive propensities of particular situations to produce given results."[322]

Now, if this discussion is applied to arguments about the causal events that have produced *homo sapiens* (as we know ourselves), the best explanation becomes the one that has the propensity to give a more probable solution to the question. And, if this is then cast in the form of the likeliest originating set of circumstances, then we may adduce theism as the most probable explanation of the anthropic principle, which in turn has set the necessary conditions for the emergence of human beings. If the theistic explanation is correct the chance of human beings coming into existence is 100%, because the will of the creator will be accomplished. If, on the other hand, the naturalist explanation is correct, the chance is greatly reduced (almost to zero), for the probability that the events necessary for human beings to have shown up out of the evolutionary process is almost inconceivable; only the slightest, minutest variation in the initial conditions and subsequent developments would have had to change for the process to finish up being utterly sterile.[323] This does not equate to demonstrating the truth of the theistic hypothesis, but makes it extremely probable.

In answer to these difficulties in applying the theory of IBE to the question of a theistic or non-theistic universe, one can readily admit that there cannot be as great a degree of conviction about the truth of the matter as is the case of scientific investigation. The evidence is of a different class. This is in the nature of the case, for as we have maintained from the beginning we are dealing here with two kinds of reality, and therefore two kinds of knowledge: the external world and the internal world of the human experience of being human. In the latter case, the observer becomes the observed and, therefore is highly engaged in a personal and subjective exploration of her own sense of being and identity. The challenge of being entirely honest about questions that affect one's own self-understanding is immense. How does one begin to stand outside one's own formation as a human being in order to have an impartial and unprejudiced vantage-point?

Fortunately, it is precisely this heuristic means of arriving at the greatest possible approximation to the truth that can overcome subjective partialities. IBE is a rational consideration of all claimants to know the ultimate reality that lies behind the experience of being human. No claim to know the ultimate meaning of life is excluded *ab initio.* All can be part of the dialogue, which proceeds by way of testing the claims against one another and against the stubborn facts of human life in the world. Naturally, there is no final human arbiter. Each person or group has to decide for itself how far its intuition, common-sense, philosophy of life (home-spun or borrowed), ideology or religion is best able to make sense of the widest spread of the reality of life. The process is one of advocacy in which alternative explanations are

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[322] David Papineau, 'Philosophy of Science' in *The Blackwell Companion to Philosophy*, p. 315.

[323] In a recent article John Polkinghorne sets out some examples of *recent* discoveries that offer strong confirmation for the theistic hypothesis concerning the origin and development of life; see, 'God and Physics' in *God is Great, God is Good*, pp. 65-77.

promoted, discussed and judged. It is assumed that where there are conflicting claims, they cannot both be valid.

When it comes to knowledge in the realm of human self-awareness, this is almost certainly the best way of arriving at an understanding of how and why things are as they are. This is a non-dogmatic, bottom-up approach. If alternative explanations are treated fairly, on the basis of considering the opinions of others as one would wish others to consider one's own, the most favourable condition for arriving at a knowledge of the truth can prevail.[324] The method, in its application to the epistemological predicament of the West, can heal the breach between knowledge of facts and mere opinions, between public truth and private beliefs.

It is exemplified in a recent book by Keith Ward,[325] in which he concludes by arguing that, as an explanation of human experience in the universe, materialism as an alternative to theism is deficient in its ability to explain a number of ultimate questions: the final basis of matter, consciousness, moral sensibility, the universal longing for a sense of purpose, the commitment to rational thinking and the existence of the universe. These are precisely the questions, and there are others (such as aesthetic appreciation and the intrinsic dignity of human beings), which are unanswerable, given the present epistemological predicament.

It is curious, however, that a theistic world-view (rejected by metaphysical materialism) gives a perfectly adequate, rational explanation of each one of these questions. It is, perhaps, not surprising that some atheists are prepared to concede that, although in their opinion theism is false, human beings nevertheless function better on the supposition that it is true. This, of course, though not a demonstration of its truth, may be a reliable indication.

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[324] Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action* (trans. Thomas McCarthy) (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984) offers an analysis of the conditions necessary for inter-personal communication to be governed by the ideal of rational discourse, such as sincerity, truth-telling and rational warrant. He refers to this as "an ideal speech situation". He hoped that these rules would enable people to conduct the discussion of disagreements in a way most likely to promote understanding of all the issues involved; see, also, *The Collapse of the Fact/Value Dichotomy*, pp. 113-117.

[325] *The God Conclusion: God and the Western Philosophical Tradition* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2009), chapter 11, 'Materialism and its Discontents.'

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Note:
an entry with a date written, for example, in the following way – 2003/3 – indicates the date of the third edition of the work in question.

SUMMARY

This thesis begins with the assumption that dialogue is an intrinsic part of the mission of the Christian community. This supposition has been well established in missiological thinking for a number of decades. In large part the dialogue in question has been directed towards conversation and sharing with people of different religious traditions. However, the World Council of Churches has included within its portfolio dialogue with contemporary ideologies (largely referring to various forms of socialism). In this thesis I take up the challenge of extending the dialogue to various kinds of secular thinking in the Western world. In pursuing this objective, I concentrate on one aspect of secular belief: the way the fundamental question of epistemology, or theory of knowledge, is handled.

I argue that epistemology, from a secular perspective, is now in crisis, due to its failure to achieve a unified theory of knowledge. Following a generally accepted split between reason and revelation, deriving from intellectual shifts at the time of the Enlightenment, human beings are in the curious position of having ample understanding of the mechanisms of the natural world (their external environment), whilst being largely unable to answer crucial questions about themselves. The history, nature and consequences of this dilemma have been traced in numerous publications, not least in the extensive literature dedicated to exploring the relation between science and faith. In this thesis I outline some of the issues that have come to the fore, and that continue to be debated.

As reflection on some of the most fundamental questions about human existence in an almost inconceivably vast universe abhors a vacuum – for, as a species, humans long for and strive to attain satisfactory answers – some scientists with a philosophical bent are postulating the belief that knowledge gained through observation of the natural world (including the physical mechanisms of the human brain), by means of controlled experimentation, will be sufficient to explain the sum total of human experience. This belief derives from what has been called 'scientific expansionism,' i.e. the conviction that science will be able to encompass all the knowledge required to give a full account of human life on earth. Such an idea appeals to the simplest explanation, i.e. the one that needs to postulate the lowest level of rational complexity or to introduce the least number of auxiliary hypotheses in order to make sense of experience.

I argue that knowledge that it is entirely derived 'from below, that is by inference from data acquired from material sources, is intrinsically incapable of discovering the whole truth about what it means to be human. What is required, in addition to knowledge 'from below,' is knowledge 'from outside'. Just as science operates within the framework of a given material reality, so, in order to complete the circle of knowledge, there needs to be another reality available, which tells us what otherwise we could not know. Within the Christian tradition of thought, this is called revelation or divine disclosure.

I proceed in my argument by seeking to answer the fundamental epistemological question, what is required if we are to obtain justified true belief about matters that

cannot be settled by appeal to empirical data alone? I put forward the thesis that the heuristic device, known as Inference to the Best Explanation (IBE), may serve as a fruitful tool for concluding what is the ultimate truth of the matter. The best explanation is, *prima facie*, unlikely to be the simplest explanation, just because the latter tends to reduce complexity to what can be handled by unaided human reason, and as a result ignores substantial pieces of evidence on methodological grounds. However, when the simplest explanation does not explain, a more comprehensive one, if available, has to be sought.

IBE works by comparing alternative explanations of the data of experience. Inherently, it incorporates into its method of working any evidence that seems to be germane to the case. Nothing is ruled out of court *a priori*. In the case of the dialogue I am proposing, the 'best' explanation is, at one and the same time, the explanation most warranted by all relevant evidence and the one that would, if true, provide the best understanding. I claim that this heuristic device is the most adequate way of engaging in a dialogue between the Christian faith and the epistemological predicament of secular, post-Enlightenment culture. I further argue that in this sense it amply fulfils the criteria for being a missiological project.

Before citing instances of the way in which IBE can work in the context of the dialogue with the epistemological predicament of the West, I deal with criticisms of the method itself and the observation that it is not the purpose of Christian faith to give explanations. I then seek to demonstrate how the dialogue may proceed by use of this method. I endeavour to show that science is unable, in its own terms, to give an adequate explanation of the success of its own procedures, but that Christian faith (understood as Trinitarian theistic realism) produces a refined explanation that does justice to the question, why is the scientific method so profoundly able to do its job? I also turn my attention to the origin and justification of moral sentiments and judgements, asking whether it is possible to derive intrinsic prescriptive demands from a naturalistic view of the world. I look at the theory of ethics known as the Impartial Observer (IO) and also seek to understand how the genesis of moral values could be possible on the basis of a non-theistic account of evolution. I compare and contrast these attempts at giving a foundation for the moral life with the Divine Command theory, looking particularly at the most common objections that have been raised against the latter.

In a couple of chapters, I seek to show the importance of epistemological considerations in the case of a three-way dialogue between naturalistic secularism, Christian faith and other religious traditions. The purpose of introducing the inter-religious dimension here is to demonstrate the versatility of the IBE method. For example, by its means, it is, in my judgement, possible to show that the account of religious diversity known as pluralism is epistemologically invalid. Also, I argue that, at least in the West, non-Christian religions, if they wish to engage with a culture that historically has largely excluded them, will also have to attend to the epistemological predicament. This latter may be a peculiar outworking of a local set of historical circumstances, or it may have global ramifications.

In the final analysis, this thesis will have achieved its aim, not so much by demonstrating that Christian, Trinitarian theism is the 'best' explanation for the full

range of human experiences of the world and of themselves, but by confirming the hypothesis that IBE is an excellent tool for engaging in dialogue with the epistemological predicament of the West, and that dialogue is an essential part of the Church's missiological task. Its potential fruitfulness is seen in the fact that it is an accepted means of testing scientific hypotheses, and also implicitly undergirds a way of reasoning used by the first generation of Christians in their encounter with the Gentile world of their time. By extension, it should be possible to employ its method in other fields of enquiry, such as issues of economic justice. Such an application, however, would require another thesis.

SAMENVATTING

Dit proefschrift begint met de aanname dat dialoog een intrinsiek deel is van de missie van de christelijke gemeenschap. Deze aanname is voldoende onderbouwd in de missiologische theorievorming gedurende de laatste decennia. Voor een groot deel had deze theorievorming betrekking op dialoog met andersgelovigen. De Wereldraad van Kerken heeft echter ook de dialoog met de hedendaagse ideologieën (met name verschillende vormen van socialisme) op de agenda gezet. In dit proefschrift wil ik die theorievorming uitbreiden naar de dialoog met diverse vormen van seculier denken in de Westerse wereld. Om dit doel te bereiken richt ik mij op een aspect van het seculiere geloof, namelijk de wijze waarop wordt omgegaan met de fundamentele vraag van de epistemologie of kentheorie.

Ik beargumenteer dat de epistemologie zich vanuit een seculier perspectief in een hachelijke situatie bevindt omdat ze niet in staat is gebleken tot een geïntegreerde kentheorie te komen. In aansluiting bij de intellectuele verandering die uit de Verlichting voortkomt, wordt de scheiding van rede en openbaring thans vrij algemeen aanvaard. Maar daardoor verkeren mensen in de merkwaardige positie dat ze wel een goed inzicht hebben in hun natuurlijke omgeving, maar dat ze niet in staat zijn fundamentele vragen omtrent hun eigen bestaan te beantwoorden. De geschiedenis, de aard en de consequenties van dit dilemma zijn behandeld in talrijke publicaties, niet in de laatste plaats in de omvangrijke literatuur die is gewijd aan de exploratie van de relatie tussen wetenschap en geloof. In dit proefschrift bespreek ik een aantal onderwerpen die in dit debat naar voren gekomen zijn, en die nog steeds voorwerp van discussie zijn.

Mensen verlangen en streven naar bevredigende antwoorden op de meest fundamentele vragen van het leven. Ze gruwelen van het afschuwelijke vacuüm in het begrip van het bijna onvatbare menselijke bestaan. Sommige wetenschappers met een filosofische inslag geloven in de kennis die verkregen is door observatie van de natuurlijke wereld (inclusief de fysische mechanismen van het menselijke brein). Ze gaan ervan uit dat de kennis die verkregen is door middel van gecontroleerde experimenten voldoende zal zijn om de som van menselijke ervaringen te verklaren. Dit geloof komt voort uit wat genoemd wordt 'wetenschappelijk expansionisme', dit wil zeggen, de overtuiging dat wetenschap in staat zal zijn om alle kennis te vergaren die nodig is om menselijk leven op aarde te bevatten. Dit idee doet een beroep op de eenvoudigste verklaring, namelijk de verklaring die het laagste niveau van rationele complexiteit aanneemt en uitgaat van een gering aantal hypothesen om ervaring te begrijpen.

Ik beargumenteer dat kennis die totaal van 'onder-op' vergaard is, dat wil zeggen, die afgeleid is van gegevens die verkregen zijn uit materiële bronnen, intrinsiek niet in staat is om de gehele waarheid te ontdekken over wat het betekent mens te zijn. Als aanvulling op kennis van 'onder-op' is kennis van 'buiten-af' nodig. Net zoals wetenschap functioneert in het kader van een gegeven materiële werkelijkheid, zo ook moet er, om de cirkel van de kennis te complementeren, een andere werkelijkheid zijn

die ons vertelt wat we anders niet kunnen weten. Binnen de traditie van het christelijke denken wordt dit openbaring of goddelijke onthulling genoemd.
Ik vervolg mijn redenering met een poging de fundamentele epistemologische vraag te beantwoorden wat nodig is wanneer we een beargumenteerd waar geloof willen verkrijgen over zaken die niet verhelderd kunnen worden met een beroep op empirische gegevens alleen. Ik verdedig de stelling dat het heuristische ontwerp dat bekend staat als *Inference to the Best Explanation* (IBE) een geschikt instrument is om te beslissen over wat de uiteindelijke waarheid is over de kwestie. De beste verklaring is, *prima facie*, in tegenstelling tot de eenvoudigste verklaring. Deze laatstgenoemde reduceert de rationele complexiteit tot wat zonder hulp bevat kan worden door de menselijke rede. En bijgevolg negeert ze wezenlijke stukken van bewijsvoering op epistemologische gronden. Echter, wanneer de eenvoudigste verklaring niet verklaart, moet een meer omvattende verklaring gezocht worden.
IBE functioneert door het vergelijken van alternatieve verklaringen voor ervaringsgegevens. De methode neemt iedere evidentie die relevant is voor de kwestie in ogenschouw. Niets wordt *a priori* van de bewijsvoering uitgesloten. De beste verklaring is de verklaring die gewaarborgd wordt door alle relevante evidentie en die tegelijk, indien ze waar is, het beste begrip geeft. Ik beweer dat dit heuristisch instrument voor christelijke gelovigen de beste manier is om een dialoog aan te gaan met de epistemologische crisis van de seculiere cultuur van na de Verlichting, en dat dit waarlijk een missiologisch project is.
Voordat ik voorbeelden geef van de manier waarop IBE kan functioneren in de context van de dialoog met de epistemologische crisis in het Westen, behandel ik de kritiek op de methode zelf en het commentaar dat het niet het doel is van het christelijke geloof om verklaringen te geven. Daarna laat ik zien hoe de dialoog met gebruikmaking van deze methode gestalte kan krijgen. Ik tracht te laten zien dat wetenschap niet in staat is, op eigen kracht, een adequate verklaring te geven voor de successen van zijn eigen procedures, maar dat het christelijk geloof (verstaan als Trinitarisch, theïstisch realisme) een verfijnde verklaring produceert die recht doet aan de vraag, waarom de wetenschappelijke methode zo goed in staat is zijn taak uit te voeren. Ik vestig ook de aandacht op de oorsprong en de rechtvaardiging van morele sentimenten en oordelen, en vraag me af of het mogelijk is intrinsiek prescriptieve eisen af te leiden uit een naturalistische kijk op de wereld. Ik bekijk de theorie van ethiek die bekend staat als de *Impartial Observer* theorie en probeer te begrijpen hoe het ontstaan van morele oordelen mogelijk zou kunnen zijn op basis van een niet-theïstisch verstaan van evolutie. Ik vergelijk en contrasteer deze pogingen om een fundering te geven voor het morele leven met de *Divine Command* theorie, vooral kijkend naar de meest algemene bezwaren die geuit zijn tegen deze theorie.
In een aantal hoofdstukken probeer ik het belang aan te tonen van epistemologische overwegingen in de context van de drievoudige dialoog tussen naturalistisch secularisme, christelijk geloof en andere religieuze tradities. Het doel van het introduceren van de inter-religieuze dimensie hier, is de brede toepasbaarheid van de IBE methode aan te tonen. Door gebruik van deze methode is het volgens mij bijvoorbeeld mogelijk aan te tonen dat het verstaan van religieuze diversiteit in

termen van pluralisme epistemologisch gezien niet valide is. Ook toon ik aan dat niet-christelijke religies die een dialoog willen aangaan met de cultuur die hen historisch gezien grotendeels heeft uitgesloten, in ieder geval in het Westen moeten ingaan op de epistemologische crisis. Dit laatste kan een specifieke verwerking zijn van lokale omstandigheden, of kan een globale omvang hebben.

Uiteindelijk gaat het mij er niet om aan te tonen dat het christelijke, trinitarische theïsme de beste verklaring biedt voor een reeks van menselijke ervaringen van de wereld. Dit proefschrift heeft haar doel bereikt als de hypothese bevestigd is dat IBE een uitermate geschikt instrument is om een dialoog aan te gaan met de epistemologische crisis in het Westen, en dat die dialoog een essentieel onderdeel is van de missiologische opdracht van de kerk. De potentiële geschiktheid van IBE wordt bevestigd door het feit dat ze een geaccepteerde methode is voor het testen van wetenschappelijke hypothesen, en dat ze impliciet ook ten grondslag ligt aan een manier van redeneren die gebruikt werd door de eerste generatie van christenen in hun ontmoeting met de wereld van ongelovigen in hun tijd. Daar komt bij dat het mogelijk moet zijn om deze methode te gebruiken in andere onderzoeksgebieden zoals kwesties van sociale rechtvaardigheid. Zo'n toepassing zou echter een ander proefschrift vergen.

J. Andrew Kirk – C.V.

1. Personal details

Married with three children; Ordained in the Church of England.

2. Degrees

B.D. and MPhil (London), BA (Cambridge).

3. Last positions held

- Dean and Head of the School of Mission and World Christianity, Selly Oak Colleges 1990 - 1999
- Senior Lecturer in Mission and World Christianity, Department of Theology, University of Birmingham 1999 - 2002
- Retired from full-time employment 2002

4. Selected activities

- Founder member, Latin American Theological Fraternity 1970
- Co-Founder, London Institute for Contemporary Christianity 1982
- Co-Founder, Life and Peace Institute (Uppsala, Sweden) 1984
- Member of the Research Project, 'Towards a Missiology of Western Culture' 1992 - 1997
- Treasurer of the International Association of Mission Studies 1990 - 2004

5. Selected publications (books)

I have written 15 books in total, amongst them are the following:

- *Liberation Theology: An Evangelical View from the Third World* (1978) (also published in the USA and Korea).
- *Theology encounters Revolution* (1980) (also published in the USA and in Sweden).
- *Loosing the Chains: religion as opium and liberation* (1992) (also published in Germany).
- *The Mission of Theology and Theology as Mission* (1997) (published in the USA and UK).
- *The Meaning of Freedom: a study of Secular, Muslim and Christian Views* (1998).
- *What is Mission? Theological Explorations* (1999) (also published in Brazil, Sweden and Korea).
- *Mission under Scrutiny: Confronting Current Challenges* (2006).
- *The Future of Reason, Science and Faith: Following Modernity and Postmodernity* (2007).
- *A Conflict of Civilisations? Islam, the West and Christian Faith* (2010).